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ASTOR LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

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"They shouted and cheered; then Mr. Trelawny put his hand on her head."

Page 810.

Esther's Charge.

ESTHER'S CHARGE

A STORY FOR GIRLS

BY

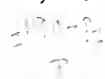
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"IN THE DAYS OF CHIVALRY," ETC., ETC.

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ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

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ESTHER'S CHARGE.

CHAPTER I.

A LITTLE MANAGER.

“WHERE is Miss Esther, Genefer?”

“I think she’s at the linen-press, marm, putting away the things from the wash.”

“Tell her to come to me when she has done that. I want to speak to her.”

“Yes, marm, I will. Can I do anything else for you?”

“No, thank you. I have all I want. But send Miss Esther to me quickly.”

Mrs. St. Aiden was lying on a couch in a very pretty, dainty, little room, which opened upon a garden, blazing with late spring and early summer flowers. The lawn was still green, and looked like velvet, and the beds and borders of

flowers were carefully tended, as could be seen at a glance. The gravel paths were rolled and weeded, and everything was in exquisite order, both within and without the house. Everything also was on a very small scale ; and the lady herself, who was clad in deep widow's weeds, was small and slim also, and looked as if she were somewhat of an invalid, which indeed was the case.

Rather more than a year ago her husband had died after a very short illness, and she had never been well since, although she was not exactly ill of any disease. She was weak and easily upset, and she had to depend a good deal upon her servants and her only daughter. She had never been accustomed to think for herself. Captain St. Aiden had always done the thinking and the managing as long as he lived, and the poor lady felt very helpless when he was taken from her.

When the servant had gone she took up again a letter which she had been reading, and kept turning the leaves of it over and over again, sighing, and seeming troubled and perplexed. She also kept looking across the room towards

the door at short intervals, sometimes saying half aloud as she did so,—

“I wish Esther would come!”

Presently the door opened, and a little girl came into the room with very quiet steps. She was dressed daintily in a white frock, with black sash and bows. She had a grave little face, that was generally rather pale, and looked small beneath the wide brow and big gray eyes. Perhaps it looked smaller for the flowing mass of wavy hair, a dusky chestnut color, that flowed over the child's shoulders and hung below her waist. It was very beautiful hair, soft and silky, with a crisp wave in it that made it stand off from her face like a cloud. It looked dark in the shadow, but when the sun shone upon it, it glistened almost like gold. Mrs. St. Aiden was very proud of Esther's hair, and considered it her chief beauty; but it was a source of considerable trouble to the little girl herself, for it took a great deal of brushing and combing to keep it in order, and tangled dreadfully when she played games. Then often the weight and heat of it made her head ache, especially at night; and she used to

long to have a cropped head like other little children she sometimes saw, or, at least, to have only moderately long hair, like her two little friends at the rectory, Prissy and Milly Polperran.

"Did you want me, mama?" asked Esther, coming forwards towards the couch.

"Yes, dear, I did. I want to talk to you about something very serious. I have a letter here from your Uncle Arthur. He wants to send his two little boys here for three years, because he has just got an appointment that will take him out of the country all that time. I don't know what to think about it; it is so very sudden."

It was sudden, and Mrs. St. Aiden looked rather piteously at Esther. It seemed so hard for her to have to decide upon such a step in a hurry, and her brother wanted an answer at once. He had to make his own arrangements very quickly.

Esther was quite used to being her mother's confidante and adviser. Even in her father's lifetime she had often been promoted to this post during his frequent absences. When he lay dying, he had taken Esther's hands in his, and

looking into her serious eyes, so like his own, had told her to take great care of mama always, and try to be a help and comfort to her. Her father had often called her his "wise little woman," and had talked to her much more gravely and seriously than most fathers do to their young children. Esther, too, having no brothers or sisters, had grown up almost entirely with her elders, and, therefore, she had developed a gravity and seriousness not usual at her age, though she was by no means lacking in the capacity for childish fun on the rare occasions when she was free to indulge in it.

She was ten years old at this time, and she was not taller than many children are at seven or eight; but there was a thoughtful look upon the small face and in the big gray eyes which was different from what is generally to be seen in the eyes of children of that age.

"Two little boys!" repeated Esther gravely; "they will be my cousins, I suppose. How old are they, and what are their names, mama?"

"The elder is nine, and the other rather more than a year younger. He does not mention their

names, but I know the elder is called Philip, after our grandfather. I'm not quite sure about the second. Arthur is such a very bad correspondent, and poor Ada died when the second boy was born. You see it was like this, Esther. The grandmother on the mother's side kept house for him, and took care of the children after their mother died—she was living with him then. She died a year ago, and things have been going on in the same groove at his house. But now comes this appointment abroad, and he can neither take the boys nor leave them at home alone. They are not fit for school yet, he says. Of course they are not ready for public school, but I should have thought they might—well, never mind that. What he says is that they want taking in hand by a good governess or tutor, and suggests that they should come to me, and that I should find such a person, and that you should share the lessons, and get a good start with your education.”

Esther's eyes began to sparkle beneath their long black lashes. She had an ardent love of study, and hitherto she had only been able to

pick up such odd crumbs as were to be had from the desultory teaching of her mother, or from the study of such books as she could lay hands upon in that little-used room that was called the study, though nobody ever studied there save herself.

In her father's lifetime Esther had been well grounded, but since his death her education had been conducted in a very haphazard fashion. She had a wonderful thirst after knowledge, and in her leisure hours would almost always be found poring over a book ; but of real tuition she had now hardly any, and the thought of a regular governess or tutor made her eyes sparkle with joy.

“ O mama ! could we ? ”

“ Could we what, Esther ? ”

“ Have a governess or tutor here as well as two boys ? ”

“ Not in the house itself, of course. But he or she could lodge in the place, I suppose, and come every day. Your uncle is very liberal in his ideas, Esther. He is going to let his own big house. He has had an offer already, and he suggests paying over three or four hundred

pounds a year to me, if I will undertake the charge of the two boys. Of course that would make it all very easy in some ways."

Esther's eyes grew round with wonder. She knew all about her mother's affairs, and how difficult it sometimes was to keep everything in the dainty state of perfection expected, upon the small income they inherited. To have this income doubled at a stroke, and only two boys to keep and a tutor's salary to pay out of it! Why, that would be a wonderful easing of many burdens which weighed heavily sometimes upon Esther's youthful shoulders. She had often found it so difficult to satisfy her delicate mother's wishes and whims, and yet to keep the weekly bills down to the sum Genefer said they ought not to exceed.

"O mama, what a lot of money!"

"Your uncle is a well-to-do man, my dear, and he truly says that terms at good private schools, where the holidays have to be provided for as well, run into a lot of money. And he does not think the boys are fit for school yet. He says they want breaking in by a tutor first. They

have had a governess up till now, but he thinks a tutor would be better, especially as there is no man in this house. I hope he does not mean that the boys are very naughty and troublesome. I don't know what I shall do with them if they are."

The lady sighed, and looked at Esther in that half helpless way which always went to the little girl's heart. She bent over and kissed her brow.

"Never mind, mama dear. I will take care of the boys," she said, in her womanly way. "They are both younger than I. I think it will be nice to have regular lessons again. I think papa would have been pleased about that. And perhaps I shall like having boys to play with too ; only it will be strange at first."

"We could keep a girl, then, to help Genefer and Janet," said Mrs. St. Aiden. "The boys will have to have the big attic up at the top of the house, and the study to do lessons in. I hope they will not be very noisy ; and there is the garden to play in. But they must not break the flowers, or take the fruit, or spoil the grass, or cut up the gravel. You will have to keep them

in order, Esther. I can't have the place torn up by a pair of riotous boys."

"I will take care of them, mama dear," answered Esther bravely, though her heart sank just a little at the thought of the unknown element about to be introduced into her life. She had had so little experience of boys—there was only little Herbert at the rectory who ever came here, and he was quite good, and under the care of his elder sisters. Would these boys let her keep them in order as Bertie was kept by Prissy and Milly? She hoped they would, and she said nothing of her misgivings to her mother.

"Do you think you will say 'yes' to Uncle Arthur?"

"I think I must, my dear. I don't like to refuse; and, of course, there are advantages. Your education has been a difficulty. I have not the health myself, and we cannot afford a governess for you, and this is the first time Arthur has ever asked me to do anything for him. And, really, I might be able to keep a little pony carriage, and get out in the summer, with this addition to our income. I always feel

that if I could get out more I should get back my health much quicker."

"Esther's eyes sparkled again at these words, and a little pink flush rose in her cheeks. It was the thing of all others she had always wished for her mother—a dear little pony, and a little low basket carriage in which she could drive her out.

In father's days they had had one, and Esther had been allowed to drive the quiet pony when she was quite a little child. But that belonged to the old life, before the father had been taken away and they had come here to live, right down in Cornwall, at this little quaint Hermitage, as the house was called. Since then no such luxury could be dreamed of. It had been all they could do to make ends meet, and keep the mother content with what could be done by two maids, and one man coming in and out to care for the garden. And even so, Esther often wondered how they would get on, if it were not for all that Mr. Trelawny did for them.

"O mama!" she cried, "could we really have a pony again?"

"We will think about it. I should like to, if

we could. It seems a pity that that nice little stable should stand empty ; and there is the little paddock too. The pony could run there when he wasn't wanted, and that would save something in his keep. I have always been used to my little drives, and I miss them very much. But, of course, I shall not make up my mind in a hurry. I should like to see Mr. Trelawny about it all even before I write to Uncle Arthur."

A little shadow fell over Esther's face. She felt sure she knew what was coming.

"I wish, dear, you would just run up to the Crag and ask Mr. Trelawny if he would come down and see me about this."

The shadow deepened as the words were spoken, but Esther made only one effort to save herself the task.

"Couldn't Genefer go, mama? It is so hot !"

"It will be getting cooler every hour now, and there is plenty of shade through the wood. Have you had a walk to-day?"

"No, mama ; I have been busy. Saturday is always a busy day, you know."

“Then a walk will do you good, and you will go much quicker than Genefer. Bring Mr. Trelawny back with you if you can. You can tell him a little about it, and he will know that it is important. You have time to go and come back before your tea-time.”

Esther did not argue the matter any more. She had never betrayed to any living creature this great fear which possessed her. She was half ashamed of it, yet she could never conquer it. She was more afraid of Mr. Trelawny than of anything in the world beside. He was like the embodiment of all the wizards, and genii, and magicians, and giants which she had read of in her fairy story-books, or of the mysterious historic personages over whom she had trembled when poring over the pages of historical romance.

He was a very big man, with a very big voice, and he always talked in a way which she could not fully understand, and which almost frightened her out of her wits.

It was the greatest possible penance to have to go up to his great big house on the hill, and she never approached it without tremors and quak-

ings of heart. She fully believed that it contained dungeons, oubliettes, and other horrors. She had been told that the crags beneath were riddled with great hollow caves, where monks had hidden in times of persecution, and where smugglers had hidden their goods and fought desperate battles with the excise officers and coast-guardsmen. The whole place seemed to her to be full of mystery and peril, and the fit owner and guardian was this gigantic Cornish squire, with his rolling voice, leonine head, and autocratic air.

He was always asking her why she did not oftener come to see him, but Esther would only shrink away and answer in her low, little voice that she had so much to do at home. And then he would laugh one of his big, sonorous laughs, that seemed to fill the house; and it was he who had given her the name of the "little manager," and when he called her by it he did so with an air of mock homage which frightened her more than anything else. At other times he would call her "Goldylocks," and pretend he was going to cut off her hair to make a cable for his yacht,

which lay at anchor in the bay ; and he would tell her a terrible story about a man who sought to anchor in the middle of a whirlpool, the cable being made of maidens' hair—only the golden strand gave way, and so he got drowned instead of winning his wife by his act of daring boldness. This story was in verse, and he would roll it out in his big, melodious voice ; and she was always obliged to listen, for the fascination was strong upon her. And then in the night she would lie shivering in her bed, picturing Mr. Trelawny and his yacht going round and round in the dreadful whirlpool, and her own chestnut-brown hair being the cable which had failed to hold fast !

And yet Mr. Trelawny was a very kind friend to them. He was a relation, too, though not at all a near one, and had been very fond of Esther's father, who was his kinsman. When the widow and child had been left with only a small provision, Mr. Trelawny had brought them to this pretty house at the foot of the hill upon which his big one stood. He had installed them there, and he would not take any rent for it. And he sent down his own gardener several times a week

to make the garden trim and bright, and keep it well stocked with flowers and fruit.

Once a week he always came down himself and gave an eye to everything. Mrs. St. Aiden looked forward to these visits, as they broke the monotony of her life, and Mr. Trelawny was always gentle to the helpless little widow. But Esther always tried to keep out of the way when she could, and the worst of it was that she was afraid Mr. Trelawny had a suspicion of this, and that it made him tease her more than ever.

However, she never disobeyed her mother, or refused to do what was asked of her, and she knew that such a step as this one would never be taken without Mr. Trelawny's approval. Indeed, she saw that he ought to be asked, since the house was his ; and, perhaps, he would not like two boys to be brought there. Esther had heard that boys could be very mischievous beings, and, though she could not quite think what they did, she saw that the lord of the manor had a right to be consulted.

The Hermitage lay nestling just at the foot of a great craggy hill, that was clothed on one side

with wood—mostly pine and spruce fir ; but on the other it was all crag and cliff, and looked sheer down upon the tumbling waves of the great Atlantic.

Near to the Hermitage, along the white road, lay a few other houses, and the little village of St. Maur, with its quaint old church and pretty village green. There were hills and moors again behind it, wild, and bleak, and boundless, as it seemed to the little girl whenever she climbed them. But St. Maur itself was a sheltered little place ; the boom of the sea only sounded when the surf was beating very strong, and it was so sheltered from the wind that trees grew as they grew nowhere else in the neighborhood, and flowers flourished in the gardens as Esther had never seen them flourish in the other places where she had lived. Geraniums grew into great bushes, and fuchsias ran right up the houses as ivy did in the north, and roses bloomed till Christmas, and came on again quite early in the spring, so that they seemed to have flowers all the year round. That was a real delight to the little girl, who loved the garden above any other place ; and with a book and an apple, crouched down in the

arbor or some pleasant flowery place, she would find a peace and contentment beyond all power of expression.

As she climbed the path through the pine woods leading to Mr. Trelawny's great house, she began to wonder what it would be like to have her precious solitude invaded by a pair of little boys.

"I wish they were rather littler, so that I could take care of them," said Esther to herself. "I should like to be a little mother to them, and teach them to say their prayers, and wash their hands and faces, and keep their toys nice and tidy. But perhaps they are too big to care for being taken care of. If they are, I don't quite know what I shall do with them. But we shall have lessons a good part of the day, I suppose, and that will be interesting. Perhaps I shall be able to help them with theirs. Only they may know more than I do."

Musing like this, Esther soon found herself at the top of the hill, and coming out of the wood, saw the big, curious house right in front of her. She never looked at it without a little tremor, and she felt the thrill run through her to-day.

It was such a very old house, and there were such lots of stories about it. Once it had been a castle, and people had fought battles over it ; but that was so long, long ago that there was hardly anything left of that old building. Then it had been a monastery, and there were lots of rooms now where the monks had lived and walked about ; and the gardens were as they made them, and people said that at night you could still see the old monks flitting to and fro. But for a long time it had been a house where people lived and died in the usual way, and Trelawnys had been there for nearly three hundred years now.

Esther had a private belief that this Mr. Trelawny had been there for almost all that time, and that he had made or found the elixir of life which the historical romances talked about, so that he continued living on and on, and knew everything, and was strange and terrible. He always did seem to know everything that had happened, and his stories were at once terrifying and entrancing. If only she could have got over her fear of him, she would have enjoyed listening ; as it was, she always felt half dead with terror.

“Hallo, madam! and whither away so very fast?” cried a great deep voice from somewhere out of the heart of the earth; and Esther stopped short, with a little strangled cry of terror, for it was Mr. Trelawny’s voice, and yet he was nowhere to be seen.

“Wait a minute and I’ll come!” said the voice again, and Esther stood rooted to the spot with fear. There was a curious little sound of tap, tap, tapping somewhere underground not far away, and in another minute a great rough head appeared out of one of those crevices in the earth which formed one of the many terrors of the Crag, and a huge man dragged himself slowly out of the fissure, a hammer in his hand and several stones clinking in one of his big pockets. He was covered with earth and dust, which he proceeded to shake off as a dog does when he has been burrowing, whilst Esther stood rooted to the spot, petrified with amazement, and convinced that he had come up from some awful subterranean cavern, known only to himself, where he carried on his strange magic lore.

“Well, madam?” he said, making her one of

his low bows. When he called her madam and bowed to her Esther was always more frightened than ever. "To what happy accident may I attribute the honor of this visit?"

"Mama sent me," said Esther, seeking to steady her voice, though she was afraid to speak more than two or three words at a time.

"Ah, that is it—mama sent you. It was no idea of your own. Alas, it is ever so! Nobody seeks the poor old lonely hermit for his own sake. So mama has sent you, has she, Miss Goldyllocks? And what is your errand?"

"Mama asks if you will please read this letter, and then come and see her and advise her what to do."

Mr. Trelawny took the letter, gave one of his big laughs, and looked quizzically at Esther.

"Does your mama ever take advice, my dear?"

Esther's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"Yes, of course she does. Mama never does anything until she has been advised by everybody."

The big, rolling laugh sounded out suddenly, and Esther longed to run away. She never knew

whether she were being laughed at herself, and she did not like that thought.

“ May I say you will come soon ? ” she asked, backing a little way down the hillside.

“ Wait a moment, child ; I will come with you,” answered the big man, turning his fossils out of his pocket, and putting them, with his hammer, inside a hollow tree. “ Do you know what this letter says ? ”

“ Oh yes ; mama read it to me.”

“ Ah, of course. The ‘ little manager ’ must be consulted first. Well, and what does she say about it ? ”

“ Mama ? Oh, I think——”

“ No, not mama ; the ‘ little manager ’ herself. What do you want to do about it ? ”

Esther summoned up courage to reply sedately,—

“ I think perhaps it might be a good plan. You see, I should get a good education then, and I should like that very much. It would be a great advantage in many ways——”

But Esther left off suddenly, for Mr Trelawny was roaring with laughter again.

“Hear the child !” he cried to the empty air, as it seemed ; “ she is asked if she likes boy-play-fellows, and she replies with a dissertation on the advantages of a liberal education ! Hear that, ye shades of all the sages ! A great advantage!—Yes, my dear, I think it will be a great advantage. You will learn to be young at last, perhaps, after being grown-up ever since you were shortened. A brace of boys will wake you up a bit, and, if I read between the lines correctly, this pair are going to turn out a precious pair of pickles.”

Esther understood very little of this speech, but she tingled from head to foot with the consciousness that fun was being poked at her.

“I think mama will do as you advise about it,” she said, not being able to think of anything else to say.

The big man in the rough clothes was looking down at her with a twinkle in his eyes. He got hold of her hand and made her look up at him.

“Now tell me, child—don’t be afraid to speak the truth—do you want these young cubs to come, or don’t you ? Would it make life pleasanter to you or only a burden ?”

“ I don't think I can quite tell till I've tried,” said Esther, shaking all over, but striving to keep her fears to herself ; “ but I think it might be nice to have two little boys to take care of.”

“ To take care of, eh ? You haven't enough on your hands as it is ? ”

“ I used often to wish I'd a brother or a sister to play with ; that was before papa died. Since then I haven't had so much time to think about it, but perhaps it would be pleasant.”

“ You do play sometimes then ? ”

“ Yes ; when the little Polperrans come to see me, or when I go to see them.”

“ And you know how to do it when you try ? ”

Esther was a little puzzled, and answered doubtfully,—

“ I know how to play the games they play. I don't know any besides.”

Mr. Trelawny suddenly flung her hand away from him and burst into a great laugh.

“ I think I shall advise your mother to import these two young monkeys,” he said over his shoulder ; and to Esther's great relief, she was allowed to walk the rest of the way home by her-

self, Mr. Trelawny striding on at a great rate, and muttering to himself all the while, as was his habit.

Later on, when he had gone back again, and Esther crept in her mouse-like fashion to her mother's side, she found her closing a letter she had just written.

"Mr. Trelawny advises me to have the boys, dear," she said ; " so I have been writing to your uncle. I suppose it is the best thing to do, especially as Mr. Trelawny has undertaken to find a suitable tutor. That would have been difficult for me ; but he is a clever man, and knows the world. He will be sure to select the right person."

" Yes, mama," said Esther gently ; but she shook in her shoes the while. A tutor selected by Mr. Trelawny might surely be a very terrible person. Suppose he came from underground, and was a sort of magician himself !

CHAPTER II.

THE BOYS.

It was growing very exciting. The life of the little house, which had hitherto run so quietly in its grooves, now seemed all at once changed and expanded. There was an air of bustle pervading the upper regions. Genefer, and a stout young maid lately engaged as joint-helper to her and the cook, were busy for two whole days in turning out a great attic which formed the top story of the little house, making room in other holes and corners for the boxes and odds and ends which had been stored there, and furbishing up this place as a bedroom for the boys, who were expected in a week's time.

Esther was immensely interested. She had always thought the big attic a very charming place, only when it was dusty and dark there had not been much to attract her there.

Now the dormer windows stood open to sun and air, and commanded wide views in many directions over the valley in which St. Maur stood. Two little white beds and the needful furniture did not take up a great deal of space, and there would be ample room for the boys to frisk about, collect treasures, and range them on the various shelves and ledges, without inconveniencing anybody, or bringing disorder into the rest of the house.

Moreover there was an access to the attic from the back staircase, so that nothing dirty or disagreeable need be brought into the mistress's part of the house at all.

Genefer regarded this arrangement as a great boon, though Esther sometimes wondered why. The answer she got to her questions was generally the same, though it did not greatly enlighten her.

"Boys will be boys, all the world over, Miss Esther," Genefer would say with a shake of the head; and when she repeated this aphorism to her mother, Mrs. St. Aiden would sometimes sigh and say rather plaintively,—

"Oh, I hope we shall not find we have made

a great mistake!" and that used to set Esther wondering still more.

For her own part, she looked forward to the advent of these cousins with a great amount of interest. She had told the little Polperrans all about it, and they were greatly excited too.

"I am glad they are younger than you," said Prissy, as they walked home from church together. When Esther's mother was not able to get to church, Esther sat in the rectory pew, and her little friends generally walked with her as far as her own gate, which was about a quarter of a mile farther off than the rectory. "You will be able to keep them in order. Boys want that. They get obstreperous if they are left alone. Bertie is sometimes a little bit like that, but I never let him get the upper hand. It would never do."

Prissy was twelve years old, and had helped her mother at home and in the parish for quite a long time now. She was more grown-up in her ways than Esther, though not perhaps so thoughtful. She used to tell Esther that when she was old enough she meant to marry a clergyman and

have a parish of her own ; and Esther would listen with a sense of great respect and admiration, for she certainly felt that she should be very sorry to have a parish to care for. It was quite enough to have to help her mother to manage one little house.

“I hope they will be good boys,” she said rather timidly ; “I should think they are. They have had a grandmother and a governess as well as their father.”

“I think grandmothers often spoil boys,” Prissy answered, with her customary air of decision. “Ours does ; I don’t much like when she comes. She is often quite rude to me, and doesn’t listen to what I say ; but she pets Bertie, and gives him things, and lets him talk to her as much as he likes. I call that showing favoritism ; I don’t approve of it at all. In the parish mother never lets that sort of thing be.”

“Who was that funny man in spectacles sitting in Mr. Trelawny’s pew ?” asked Milly, who was walking in front with Bertie, but who suddenly turned back to ask the question.

Esther had not even noticed him. She never

looked towards Mr. Trelawny if she could help it. Often his great, deep-set eyes would be fixed upon her face, and that made her blush and tremble, and so she never glanced his way willingly. She had not even seen that there had been a stranger with him.

"I don't know," answered Prissy, as Esther evidently had no information to give; "I've never seen him before. I suppose he's a friend of Mr. Trelawny's, but he doesn't often have a visitor at the Crag. He's a queer man, mother says; though father always likes him."

"The other man looked like an owl; his spectacles were quite round," remarked Herbert; "most people's are oval. When the sun got on them they looked as if they were made of fire—like a big cat's eyes shining in the dark."

"Oh, don't," cried Esther quickly.

"Don't what?" asked Herbert, staring.

Esther colored and looked half ashamed.

"I don't know quite. I felt afraid. I always do feel a little afraid of Mr. Trelawny. I wonder who the other gentleman is."

Esther was soon to know.

She had spent her Sunday afternoon curled up in the garden with a book, and she had not even heard the bell when it rang. She had no idea there were visitors with her mother, and when she came in at half-past four to pour out her afternoon tea, which on Sunday they shared together, she gave a great jump and dropped her book, for there was Mr. Trelawny sitting beside her mother, and a strange gentleman standing looking out of the window, and he had on round spectacles, just such as Herbert had described.

He stepped forward and picked up Esther's book, and gave it into her hands with a smile; and as she stepped timidly forward to shake hands with Mr. Trelawny, she heard him say,—

“This is one of your future pupils, Earle.”

So this was the tutor. It had never occurred to Esther that he would come so soon, or that he would be a friend of Mr. Trelawny's. Somehow the whole thing frightened her a good deal. She was shaking all over as she gave her hand to Mr. Earle; and he seemed to notice it, for he laughed and said,—

“So you seem to think that tutor spells ogre,

little Miss Esther. We shall have to see if we can't get over that impression somehow."

Then Mr. Trelawny's great laugh rang out through the room, and he exclaimed in his big voice,—

"Oh, you won't have much trouble with her ladyship here. She will only want the birch-rod occasionally. She's a mighty hand at books, as it is—quite a budding blue-stockings, if that isn't a mixed metaphor. It's the boys you'll want that cane of mine for.—Eh, Esther? A pair of young pickles, I take it, that will take a deal of breaking-in. You tell them when they come that I've a fine array of sticks and canes from all parts of the world for Mr. Earle to take his choice of. He'll thrash some discipline into them, never you fear. You sha'n't have all the breaking-in to do. He's a fine hand at swishing, you'll see."

Then the other gentleman said something in a language Esther did not understand, at which Mr. Trelawny broke out into one of his rolling laughs, and Esther got away behind the tea-table, and began pouring out the tea with very shaking hands; and though Mr. Earle came and took the

cups, and talked to her quite kindly, her heart was all in a flutter, for she thought he was like the cruel old witch in the fairy-tale, who was so kind to the little boys and girls till she had got them into her house and into the cage, and then began to beat and starve them.

The thought of the array of sticks and canes up at the Crag, of which the tutor was to have the choice, seemed to swim before her eyes all the while.

“It is a pity you are always so shy and awkward with Mr. Trelawny, Esther,” said her mother a little plaintively when the gentlemen had gone. “He is really very kind, and would make a great pet of you if you would let him; but you’re always so cold and distant, and seem frightened out of your wits. It’s really very silly of you. And you never will call him uncle, though he has asked you more times than I can count.”

“I can never remember,” answered Esther in a very small voice. “It always goes out of my head. Besides, he isn’t my uncle.”

“No, not exactly; but he’s a kind of cousin, and you might just as well do as he asks. It vexes

me when your manners are so bad just when he comes. I thought you were going to cry or to faint just now. It is so silly to be frightened when gentlemen have a little bit of fun. It doesn't mean anything."

There were tears in Esther's eyes, but she held them bravely back.

"I can't help being frightened at Mr. Trelawny, mama. I know he is kind but he does frighten me. Is Mr. Earle a friend of his? And is he really our tutor?"

"He will be soon. But the boys are to have a week to settle down first before beginning lessons. Yes, Mr. Earle is the son of an old friend of Mr. Trelawny's; and he is very clever, and a great lover of the same things that interest Mr. Trelawny so much. So, for a time, at least, he will live up at the Crag, and come down every day for your lessons. The rest of the time he and Mr. Trelawny can spend together in their laboratory, or whatever they call it. There are a lot of experiments they want to make together."

Esther tried hard to subdue the tremor which

took hold of her at this thought, but it really was rather terrible to think that their tutor would be another of those mysterious magicians, such as she had read about in romances, who lived all day, when they could manage it, shut up with crucibles and other strange things, trying all sorts of experiments, and seeking after the elixir of life, or other mysterious compounds, that would change everything into gold, or give them power such as no men possessed before.

But it was no use trying to seek sympathy from her mother, or even from Genefer. They could not understand her fear of Mr. Trelawny. They did not believe that he had subterranean places where he lived when he was alone, or that he could see through the earth, and come up just where he chose, and know everything that was going on overhead.

Grown-up people never seemed to understand these things. Even Prissy would say, "Oh, nonsense!" when Esther tried to explain the source of her fears. But Millie and Bertie would listen open-mouthed; and when the children met the next day, Prissy being with her mother, the little

boy broke out at once with a piece of startling intelligence.

"He's Mr. Earle, and he's going to be your tutor; and he's very clever, and he's found out a great many things, and he's going to find out a lot more with Mr. Trelawny. I heard father say they were going to have an electric eye, that could see through walls and things. I expect he's got electric eyes in his head now, and that's why he wears those funny spectacles. I suppose he's going to make a pair for Mr. Trelawny, and then he'll be able to see everything too. It won't be any use trying to run away from them then. Why, they'll see you right through the hillside."

Esther began to quake all over.

"O Bertie, they couldn't!"

"But they can!" he argued stoutly. "I heard father trying to explain to mother. He said they had things that went right through the hill, and could ring bells or something on the other side. But you can't see it. I suppose it's a sort of familiar spirit that does it, but the electric eye has got something to do with it. It's going to be very queer up there, I think. Perhaps they'll

want children's blood for some of their experiments, like the old wizard of the mountains. I'll lend the book to you again, if you like. It tells you lots of things about him."

"No, please, don't," said Esther, who already remembered more than she desired of the blood-curdling story; "besides, I thought your mother had taken the book away."

"Yes, but we found it again when the house was cleaned, and it's in our cupboard now. I like it awfully."

"I don't," replied Esther, whose imagination was considerably more vivid than that of the stolid and horror-loving Herbert. "I don't want to read it any more. Mr. Trelawny's quite bad enough alone."

"Only he's not alone any more," said Milly; "he's got your tutor with him."

Esther went home in a very subdued frame of mind. She had so looked forward to regular lessons with a tutor, who could really explain things to her, and teach her the things she longed to know; and it was hard that he should turn out to be a strange and mysterious being, second only

in terrors to Mr. Trelawny himself. That's what came of trusting him with the task of choosing the tutor. Oh dear! it seemed as though life were going to be rather a hard thing for Esther in the future.

However, there really was not much time to think about it all, for the boys were coming. They would be here very soon, and the preparations for their arrival filled up every bit of spare time, and occupied the whole household.

Then came the afternoon upon which they were to arrive. They were to leave London very early in the morning, their father putting them in charge of the guard of the train, who was to see them safely to their journey's end; and Mr. Trelawny had volunteered to drive as far as the junction, twelve miles away, and save them the little slow piece upon the local line.

The boys' father had hoped to have time to bring them down himself, but at the last it had proved impossible. However, they were to be dispatched under official escort, and were bound to turn up safe and sound.

It was with a very fluttering heart that Esther

stood at the gate looking down the stretch of white road which led up to the house. She pitied the little boys being met by the terrible Mr. Trelawny, and pictured them crouched up in the carriage like a pair of frightened mice watched over and guarded by a monster cat. Her mother had suggested that she should go to meet them also, but Esther's courage had not been equal to the ordeal of the long drive with Mr. Trelawny. So there she was waiting at the gate, her heart in her mouth each time the roll of wheels was heard upon the road, running indoors now and then, just to see that everything was in readiness for the travelers' tea, when the little fellows should have arrived, but never long away from her post beside the gate.

At last she heard the unmistakable sound of the beat of a pair of horses' feet upon the hard road. That must be the carriage. The color came and went in her cheeks. She called out to Genefer that they were really coming at last, and then stood with the gate wide open behind her, whilst the odd-job man stood a little in the rear, ready to help with the luggage.

Round the bend in the road dashed the carriage. Esther heard a clamor of voices before it had stopped. There were two heads poked far out of the window, and two shrill voices were exchanging a perfect hurricane of comment and question. She saw that each boy was being held from behind by a hand upon his collar; then the carriage stopped, and the voices became audible.

"Let go, Old Bobby!" cried one voice. "Here we are!"

"The carriage can't get through the gate," shrieked the other. "Oh, drive on, drive on, coachman, and let us stick fast. It would be such fun!"

"There, get out with you, you young pickles!" spoke Mr. Trelawny's deep bass from within the carriage. "I'm thankful to deliver you up with sound skins and whole bones. Don't you see your cousin Esther waiting to speak to you? Take off your caps, and behave like little gentlemen, if you know how to."

The boys were out in a trice, but they had not even a look for Esther. Both had darted round to the horses, and stood under their noses, reach-

ing up to stroke them, perfectly fearless, and asking the coachman a hundred questions about them.

Mr. Trelawny came behind and took them each by the collar once more.

“Didn’t you hear me tell you to go and speak to your cousin?”

“Oh, she’s only a girl, and she’ll always be there. I like horses best,” remarked one youngster in a perfectly audible voice; and sensitive little Esther bit her lip, though she felt no anger in her heart. After all, she was only a girl.

“I don’t want to stay in this poky little house. I’ll go on with you, and live in your house instead.”

The next moment, to Esther’s unspeakable astonishment and dismay, both the boys had scrambled back into the carriage, and were clinging tightly to the seats, shrieking out to the coachman,—

“Drive on! drive on! This isn’t the house! We’re going to live with the bobby man!”

Esther stood perfectly aghast, unable either to speak or move. She did not know which impressed her most—the extraordinary behavior of

her cousins, or their perfect fearlessness towards Mr. Trelawny, whom they treated without a particle of respect.

His face was rather grim, though there was a humorous gleam in his eyes as he put out his long, strong arms, and hauled the obstreperous boys out of the carriage, amid much squealing, and kicking, and roars of laughter.

It was all play, but a sort of play that Esther did not understand in the least. With a boy held fast in each hand, Mr. Trelawny turned to the grave-faced little girl and said,—

“I had meant to present these two young gentlemen to your mother myself, but I think the only thing I can do is to get away as fast as I can. Perhaps they will come to their senses then;” and so saying, he made a sudden dive into the carriage, which had now been relieved of the luggage with which it had been piled.

The boys were after him like a shot, and Esther was in terror lest they should be run over before the carriage got safely away; but at last this was achieved, after much shouting and bawling and scrimmaging; and though both boys set off in



"How d'ye do? Hadn't time to speak to you before."—Page 43.

Esther's Charge.

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pursuit like a pair of street Arabs, the horses soon left them behind, and they returned panting and breathless to the little gate.

“He’s a jolly old buffer,” said one of the boys; “I’d like to have gone with him.”

“I shall go and see him every day,” remarked the other. “He said he lived close by.”

Then they reached the gate once more, and held out their rather smutty paws to Esther.

“How d’ye do? Hadn’t time to speak to you before. Are we all going to live in this funny little box of a place?”

“It’s our house,” answered Esther shyly, much more afraid of the boys than they of her; indeed they did not seem to know what fear or shyness was. “I think you’ll find there’s plenty of room inside; and we have a very nice little garden.”

“Call this a garden!” said the boy, with a look round; “I call it a pocket-handkerchief!”

Then they both laughed, and Esther laughed too, for there was something infectious about their high spirits, though they did talk in a fashion she had never heard before.

“Come and see mama first,” she said, “and

then I'll take you up-stairs to wash your hands, and then we'll have tea together. I daresay you are hungry."

They followed her into the little drawing-room where Mrs. St. Aiden lay. On her face there was a look of some perplexity, for she had heard a great deal of shouting and laughing, and was in some anxiety to know what it could mean.

Now she was looking upon a couple of little boys, in plain dark-blue knickerbocker suits, both having round faces and curly hair, though that of the elder boy was dark brown, and his eyes were a bright hazel ; whilst the younger was blue-eyed, his hair the color of burnished gold, and his face, when at rest, wore a sort of cherubic expression that went to his aunt's heart.

"My dears, I am very glad to see you," she said. "Come and kiss me, and tell me which is Philip and which is Percy."

The boys looked at each other, and a gleam came into their eyes.

"We'll kiss you to-day," said the elder one, advancing, and speaking with the air of one making a great concession, "because we've just

come, and Crump said we were to. But we're not going to kiss every day. That's like women and girls. Boys don't kiss like that. So you won't expect it, you know."

Then the pair advanced simultaneously; each gave and received a kiss, and stood back again, the younger one wiping the salute from his face with the cuff of his jacket,

"I hope you're not a kissing girl," he said in a low voice to Esther, who stood behind lost in amaze, "because I shan't let you kiss me."

"And which is Philip and which is Percy?" asked Mrs. St. Aiden again, more disposed to be afraid of the boys than they of her.

"Oh, we don't call ourselves by these affected names—nobody does," said the elder of the pair in lofty tones. "I suppose I'm Philip, but really I hardly know. They all call me Pickle, and him Puck. You'll have to do the same."

"I am not very fond of nicknames," said Mrs. St. Aiden, not quite pleased. "I shall call you by your right names whilst you are in my house."

"Call away; we shan't answer!" cried Pickle, with one of the ringing laughs which took off

just a little from the bluntness of his speech.—
“Come along, Puck, we’ve done it all now.—
Oh, one thing more. Crump sent his love to you,
and was sorry he couldn’t come down and see you.
I think that’s all.”

“But I don’t understand. Who is Crump?”
asked Mrs. St. Aiden rather breathlessly.

“Oh, only father,” answered Puck, as he sidled out at the door; and then making a dash across into the dining-room, he set up a great whoop of delight, for there was a splendid tea set out—chicken, and ham, and tarts, and Devonshire cream, and several kinds of cake and jam; and the boys had scrambled on to their chairs in a twinkling, and were calling out to somebody to make haste and give them their tea, as they were just starving.

“But you haven’t washed your hands,” said Esther aghast.

They contemplated their grubby little paws with great equanimity.

“Mine aren’t dirty to speak of,” said Pickle.

“Mine are quite clean,” asserted Puck, with an angelic smile.

“We’re not like cats and girls, who are always washing,” added Pickle. “Do give us our tea. We’re so hungry and thirsty!”

“But you haven’t said grace!” said Esther, whereupon the boys began to laugh.

“Grown-up people don’t say grace now. It’s not the fashion. But fire away if you want to. Crump used to make us try, but we always burst out laughing in the middle, so we gave it up.”

Esther said grace gravely, and the boys did not laugh that time. Then she helped them to what they wanted, regarding them rather in the light of wild animals, upon whose next acts there was no depending. And yet it was rather interesting, and she wanted to know more about them and their odd ways.

“Why do you call your father Crump?” she asked tentatively.

“Well, we have to call him something,” said Pickle, with his mouth full, and they both began to giggle.

“It’s my name,” said Puck, after a short pause. “I thought of it in bed one night. We laughed

for nearly an hour afterwards. We've called him it ever since."

"Does he like it?"

They stared at her round-eyed and amazed.

"I don't know. We never asked him. We've always got some name for him. You've got to call people something."

"Why don't you call him father?" asked Esther mildly; but at that question they both went off into fits of laughter, and she felt herself getting red without knowing why.

"What's your name?" asked Puck, when he had recovered himself; but his brother cut in by saying,—

"You know it's Esther—Old Bobby told us that."

"So he did; and he said you were frightened at him, and that we should have to teach you better. Fancy being frightened at an old buffer like that—a jolly one too!"

Esther sat in silent amaze. She knew they were talking of Mr. Trelaway, but she was dumfounded at their audacity, and it was rather disconcerting to hear that he was aware of her feel-

ings towards him. She hoped that he took her silence for a grown-up reserve.

“You mustn’t call Mr. Trelawny names,” she said. “He’s quite an old gentleman, and you must treat him with respect.”

“I said he was a nice old buffer,” said Puck, as though after that nothing more could be expected of him.

“But you call him ‘Old Bobby,’ and I can’t think how you dare. It isn’t at all respectful. I wonder he lets you.”

“Well, he shouldn’t play the bobby on us then,” answered Pickle. “He said he’d come to carry us off, and he marched us out of the station like a pair of prisoners. We had to call him bobby after that. I want to go and see his house. Can we go up after tea?”

Esther shook her head. She was not prepared for such a move.

“You’d better wait for another time for that,” she said. “I’ll show you our house when you’re done with tea.”

“All right; but there isn’t much to show, I should think. It’s the funniest little box I was

ever in. But perhaps we'll get some fun out of it, all the same. Crump said the sea was quite near. That'll be jolly fun. I like the sea awfully."

"I don't go there very often," said Esther. "Mama does not care about it. The coast is rather dangerous, you know."

But both boys began to laugh, as they seemed to do at whatever she said ; and Esther let them finish their tea in silence, and then took them the round of the small premises.

They liked their attic, which was a comfort ; and they liked the stable and little coach-house, and the bit of paddock and orchard beyond ; and they looked with great approval at the pine wood stretching upwards towards the craggy heights between them and the sea, where Esther told them Mr. Trelawny's house stood. It could not be seen from there, but she showed them the path which led up to it and they cried, "Jolly, jolly, jolly !" and hopped about from one foot to another, and Esther wondered if it would be possible for them to go to that strange old house upon the summit of the crag, and not feel afraid of it.

It was a comfort to Esther that they were not

unkind to her cat. They were rather disgusted that there was no dog belonging to the house ; but they seemed kind-hearted boys, and left the cat in peace by the kitchen fire.

They had been up so early that morning that they were sleepy before their usual bed-time ; and Esther was rather relieved when, at last, they were safely shut into their room for the night, having indignantly declined the offices of Genefer as nursery-maid, saying that they could do everything for themselves and each other.

Esther showed them up to their room herself, half fascinated, half repelled by their odd words and ways. Their parting good night, shouted through the door to her, was characteristic in the extreme.

“ We’re going to call you Tousle,” one of them bawled through the key-hole ; “ you’ve got such a mop of hair hanging down, you know.”

CHAPTER III.

AN ANXIOUS CHARGE.

“How quiet they are!” thought Esther, as she dressed herself next morning. “I daresay they are fast asleep still. They must be tired after that long journey yesterday. They shall sleep as long as they like this morning. I will tell Genefer not to call them. They are funny boys, but I think I shall soon get fond of them. Puck is so pretty, and looks as though he could be very good by himself. I hope we shall be happy together soon. I shall take care of them, and show them everything; and perhaps they will teach me some new games.”

Genefer came in at this moment to brush out Esther's mane of hair. The little girl had dispensed with other help at her toilet, but the great, thick, waving mass of curly hair was beyond her strength, and Genefer took great pride in brush-

ing and combing it. She was almost as proud of Esther's hair as Mrs. St. Aiden herself.

"O Genefer," said the little girl, "I think we won't call the boys yet. They seem quite quiet, and I daresay they are asleep. We will let them have their sleep out this first morning."

Genefer made a sound between a snort and a laugh.

"Lord love you, miss, them boys have been up and out this two hours! They were off before ever I was down, and I'm no lie-a-bed. They had got the door opened and were away to the pine wood. Old Sam he saw them scuttling up the path like a pair of rabbits. There'll be no holding that pair, I can see. Boys will be boys, as I always did say."

Esther's face was full of anxiety and trouble.

"O Genefer! and they don't know their way about a bit! And all the holes, and crags, and rocks on the other side! Perhaps some harm will come to them, and I promised to take care of them! Oh, please, let me go, and I'll run after them and see if I can't fetch them home! They

said something about the sea last night. Suppose they fall into one of the pools and get drowned!"

But Genefer only gave another snort.

"You take my word for it, Miss Esther, them boys isn't born to be drowned. Now don't you worrit so, child. They'll be all right. That sort never comes to any harm. You might as well go looking for a needle in a haystack, as for a boy out on the spree, as they call it. You go down and get your breakfast, and take up your mama's. We'll have them down again safe and sound, and as hungry as hunters, before you're done. It's not a bit of good your worriting after them. They can take good care of themselves, as one can see with half an eye."

Esther always submitted to Genefer's judgment, but it was with an anxious heart that she went down-stairs, and gazed up at the pine-clad hillside, hoping to see some signs of the returning boys. But there was nothing visible, and she went into the dining-room with a grave face, feeling as though she had somehow been unfaithful to her charge.

Breakfast at the Hermitage was at nine o'clock, and Esther always took up the tray to her mother's room. Mrs. St. Aiden seldom came down-stairs before noon, though she talked of getting up earlier now that the summer was coming. But Esther was fond of waiting on her, and she liked being waited upon. Afterwards Esther would eat her solitary breakfast, with a book propped up in front of her on the table; and she never thought of being lonely, especially as Smut always sat on a chair beside her, and had his saucer of milk replenished each time she poured out her own tea afresh.

But to-day Esther did not get her book; she was much too anxious, and kept rising and walking over to the window every few minutes, rather to the discomfort of the placid cat, who could not think what had come to his little mistress that day.

Esther was thankful that her mother had not seemed much alarmed by the news that the boys had gone out for a walk before breakfast.

"Boys like that sort of thing, I suppose," she said. "Their father said they were active and

independent, and that we must not make ourselves anxious over them needlessly." Then she had taken up her letters and begun to read them; and Esther stole away, wishing she could be as calm and tranquil over the disappearance of the boys as other people were.

"I'm sure they have gone up to the Crag," she kept saying to herself, "and they may have got into some awful place, and all sorts of things may be happening!"

Esther could not have explained to Genefer or anybody grown up her horror and misgiving respecting the vicinity of the Crag; but it was a very real terror to her, and it had become greater since she had heard Bertie's account of the electric eye, and other awful things which were likely to be going on there now. Mr. Trelawny had an assistant now, and was going to do still stranger things. Suppose he wanted blood, or brains, or something human for his experiments! She shivered at the bare thought.

Suddenly she jumped up with a stifled cry. Through the open window she heard the sound of steps and voices; but before she had time to

reach it again, the sunlight was darkened by the approach of a tall figure, and Esther saw that the missing boys were being led home by Mr. Earle, who had his hand upon the collar of each, as though he had found them a slippery pair of customers, and was resolved that they should not escape him.

“Here are your boys, Miss Esther,” he remarked, walking in and depositing each of them upon the chair set ready at table for him. “I hope you have not been anxious about this pair of young rascals; and will you tell your mother, with my compliments, that I am ready to begin regular study with you all any day she may like to send word! You need not wait till next week unless you like.”

There was rather a grim smile upon Mr. Earle’s face, and the round spectacles glinted in the sunshine till Esther thought they must certainly be “electric eyes”—though what electric eyes were she had not the faintest notion, which, however, did not tend to allay her uneasiness.

“Thank you, sir,” she said rather faintly; “I will tell mother.” Then she plucked up her

courage to add, "May I give you a cup of coffee after your walk?"

"Thank you; but I have breakfasted already," answered Mr. Earle with a smile, which made Esther just a little less afraid of him. "We keep early hours up at the Crag; and a good thing too for these young sinners!" and he threw a scathing look at the boys, who were sitting marvelously quiet in their places, looking exceedingly demure, not to say sheepish, though they stole glances across the table at each other, showing that the spirit of mischief within them was only temporarily in abeyance.

Mr. Earle nodded to them all and walked off through the window, and Esther looked curiously at her two charges as she poured out the coffee.

"Where did you go?" she asked.

"Why, up to Old Bobby's of course!" answered Pickle, his mouth full of bread and butter. "Why can't we live up there, instead of in this little band-box? It's no end of a jolly place. Do you go often?"

"Not very," answered Esther with a little shiver.

“That’s what he said,” remarked Puck indistinctly, “but you’ll have to come oftener now.”

“Why?”

“Oh, because he said we might come as often as you brought us. I want to go every day.”

“I don’t think Mr. Trelawny would like that.”

“Oh, he wouldn’t mind. He said he didn’t mind how many visits you paid him. He said little girls were worth twice as much as boys, but that’s all tommy rot.”

Esther’s eyes opened rather wider.

“I don’t know what tommy rot is,” she said.

Puck burst out laughing.

“She doesn’t know much, does she, Pickle?” he cried. “I wonder why Old Bobby likes girls better than boys?”

“Perhaps they’re nicer to eat,” suggested Pickle; and the two boys went off into fits of laughter, whilst Esther shook silently, wondering if that could have anything to do with it.

To judge by their appetites, the boys were none the worse for their morning’s walk—they put away the food in a fashion that astonished Esther;

but as she sat watching them at their meal, she noticed some very queer marks upon their clothes, which she did not think had been there last night—stains, and little holes, looking rather like burns; and presently she asked,—

“What have you been doing to yourselves?” and pointed to the marks.

Puck began to giggle, and Pickle answered boldly,—

“Oh, I suppose that must have been some of the stuff that smelt so nasty in the tanks.”

“What tanks?”

“Don’t you know? Haven’t you ever been down there? In that jolly old cave under Old Bobby’s house.”

Esther felt a cold thrill creeping through her.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said faintly.

“Well, you must be a precious ninny!” laughed Pickle, with a good-humored contempt; “fancy living here all these years, and not knowing that!”

“We haven’t been here so very long,” said Esther.

“Well, you’ve been here longer than we have anyhow. And we’ve found it out already.”

She was shivering a little, yet was consumed by curiosity.

“Tell me about it,” she said.

Pickle was quite ready to do that. He had appeased his first hunger, and he loved to hear himself talk, especially when he had an appreciative audience ; and Esther’s eager and half-frightened face bespoke the keenness of her interest.

“Well, you see, we woke up early, and didn’t see any fun in lying in bed ; so we got up and dressed and went out, and there was the path up through the wood, and we knew Old Bobby’s house was somewhere up there. So it seemed a good plan just to go and look him up, you know.”

“We often go out early at home,” added Puck, “and look people up. Sometimes we wake them up throwing things into their windows, or at them, if they’re shut. Sometimes they throw water at us, and that’s awful fun. One old fellow did that, and we went and got the garden-hose, and his window was wide open, and we just soused his room with water. You should have seen him

rushing to shut it up ! But there isn't always a hose and pump handy," and he looked pathetic for a moment.

"Well," continued Pickle, "we got up the hill easy enough, and it was a jolly place. We forgot all about going to the house, there was such lots to see and explore. That was how we found the cave—poking about all over. There are no end of little crevasses and things—places you can swarm down and climb up again. We had a fine time amongst them ; and then we found this one. We climbed down the chimney, but there are two more ways of getting in. Old Bobby came by one, and turned us out by the other."

"I've heard him speak of an underground place," said Esther in a low voice. "He said he'd show it to me, but I didn't want to go."

Puck stared at her in amaze.

"Why on earth not?" he asked.

"I thought it would be dark," she said, not caring to explain further ; and both boys laughed.

"It is rather dark ; but not so very when you've got used to it," said Pickle, "and boys don't mind that sort of thing. I don't know

where the light gets in ; but there are cracks, he said. Anyhow we got down a queer, narrow hole like a chimney, and dropped right down into a sort of huge fireplace—big enough to cook half a dozen men.”

“O Pickle ! ”

“ Well, it was. I expect, perhaps, they did cook men there in the olden times—when people were persecuted, you know, and they had places for torturing them,” remarked Pickle, who had a boy’s relish for horrors. “That sort of place would be just the very thing. And afterwards smugglers had it, and I daresay they murdered the excisemen in there if they got a chance. I never saw such queer marks as there were on the stones—did you, Puck ? I should think they must be human blood. You know that won’t wash out if it has once been spilt when there’s a murder. I’ve read lots of stories about that. If you only cut yourself, it doesn’t seem to leave a stain ; but that’s different from murder.”

Esther’s face was as white as her frock. Pickle enjoyed the impression he was producing.

“ Well, I don’t know what they use the cave

for now, but something very queer anyhow. I never saw such odd things as they have got ; it was just like the places you read of about wizards and magicians and the things they do. And there were tanks with lids, and we took off the lids and looked in, and they did smell. We put our fingers into some of them, and they smelt worse. And one of them burnt me ! ” and Pickle held up a couple of bandaged fingers as though in proof of his assertion.

“ Old Bobby tied them up,” said Puck. “ He said it served Pickle right for meddling. He was in a rage with us for getting in and looking at his things. I expect he’s got his enemies pickling in those tanks. I expect he’s lured them to his cave and murdered them, and hidden them away, so that the stuff will eat them all up, and nobody will find their bodies. That’s what I should like to do to all the nasty people when I’m a man. When you have a sort of castle on a crag, with underground caves to it, you can do just as you like, you know.”

“ How did Mr. Trelawny find you ? ” asked Esther, who was all in a tremor at this confirma-

tion of her own suspicions—suspicions she had scarcely dared to admit even to herself.

“Well, I’m coming to that,” said Pickle; “it wasn’t very long after we’d been down. We heard a funny scrunching noise somewhere up overhead, and then a sort of hollow echoing sound. We couldn’t make it out at first, but soon we knew what it must be. It was steps coming down-stairs—tramp, tramp, tramp—nearer and nearer.”

“O Pickle! weren’t you frightened?”

“Well, not exactly; but we thought we’d better hide in case it might be smugglers, or murderers, or something. There wasn’t time to get up the chimney again, and I’m not sure if you can get out that way, though you can get down easy enough. Anyhow it would take some time. So we crouched behind a big stone and waited; and there were two men coming down talking to each other, and their voices echoed up and down and made such funny noises; and when they got down into the cave, it was Old Bobby himself, and that owl fellow who brought us home.”

“Mr. Earle,” said Esther.

“ Earle or owl—what’s the odds? I shall call him the Owl; he’s just like one with those round gig-lamps. Well, they came down together, and then, of course, we knew it was all right; so out we jumped with a screech—and I say, Puck, didn’t we scare them too? ”

Both boys went off into fits of laughter at the recollection of the start they had given their seniors, and then Pickle took up the thread of the tale.

“ But Old Bobby was in a jolly wax too. He boxed both of us on the ears, and told us we’d no business there—”

“ He was afraid we’d found out something about the pickled corpses,” interrupted Puck. “ People never like that sort of thing found out; but, of course, we shouldn’t go telling about it—at least only to a few special people.

“ He went on at us ever so long, calling us little trespassers and spies, and wondering we had not killed ourselves; and then he led us along a funny sort of passage, and out through a door in the hillside right under the house. But they hadn’t come in that way. They had come down

a lot of steps ; so we know that the cave is just under the house, and that Old Bobby and the Owl get to it by a private way of their own. But I could find the door we went out by easily, though there is a great bush in front of it, and you can't see it when you've got a few paces off."

"And there's a path right down to the sea," cried Puck. "It's a regular smugglers' den. He got less cross when we were out, and told us a lot of things about smugglers. But he said we weren't ever to come there again—at least not alone. He said you might bring us, if we'd give our word of honor to obey you. He seemed to want you to come, Tousle. I'm sure I don't know why, for girls are no good in jolly places like that."

"I don't think I want to go," answered Esther, putting it as mildly as possible ; "I don't like underground places."

But she wanted the boys to enjoy themselves ; and after breakfast she asked leave to take them as far as the fishing village that nestled under the crags upon which Mr. Trelawny's house stood. Of course there was another way to it along the

road, which, though longer, was easier walking than climbing the hill and scrambling down the crags on the other side. The boys were willing to go the less adventurous way, as they had explored the cliff already, and Esther felt more light of heart, thinking that along the road they could not come to any harm.

But she was soon to realize that some boys find facilities for mischief and pranks wherever they are. The mercurial spirits of her charges kept her in a constant flutter of anxiety. They would get under horses' feet, climb up into strange carts to chat with the carters, jump over brooks, heedless of wet feet, chase the beasts at pasture as fearlessly as they chased butterflies, and make the acquaintance of every dog they met, whether amiable or the reverse. They even insisted upon taking an impromptu ride upon a pony out at grass, and enjoyed a gallop round the field on its bare back.

Esther, whose life until recently had been passed mainly in garrison towns, and who had not acquired the fearlessness of the country child, looked on in wondering amaze at these pranks, and

listened with a sense of wonder and awe as the boys described their exploits at their own home, the things they did, and the things they meant to do.

Down by the shore there was no holding the pair. They tore about the little quay and landing place in the greatest excitement. They got into the boats lying beneath, and scrambled from one to the other, rocking them in a fashion that sent Esther's heart into her mouth. She felt like a hen with ducklings to rear. She had not courage to follow the boys into the swaying boats, and could only stand watching them with anxious eyes, begging them to be careful, and not to fall into the water.

"Bless your heart, missie!" said an old fisherman whom Esther knew, because he often brought them fish and lobsters in his basket fresh from the sea, "they won't come to no harm. Bless you! boys allers will be boys, and 't isn't no good fur to try and hold them back. Them's not the kind that hurts. You sit here and watch them comfortable like. They're as happy as kings, they are."

The old man spoke in the soft, broad way which Esther was getting to understand now, but which puzzled her at first, as it would puzzle little people if I were to write it down the way the old man spoke it. She rather liked the funny words and turns of expression now, and she enjoyed sitting by old Master Pollard, as she called him, watching the boys and listening to his tales, which he was always ready to tell when he had a listener.

The boys had a glorious morning, paddling and shrimping with some of the fisher lads of the place. They only returned to Esther when they were growing ravenous for their dinner.

She was glad to get them home quickly, driven by the pangs of hunger ; and she told them that Master Pollard had said he would take them out fishing one of these days, and show them how the lobster-pots were set, and various other mysteries.

Esther knew something about lobster-pots, having been with the old man to visit his sometimes ; so she rose in the estimation of her cousins, especially as some of the lads had told them that

“old Pollard were once a smuggler himself, long ago, when he was a lad,” though this Esther was disposed indignantly to deny.

“Well, I hope he was, anyhow,” said Puck ; “I shall ask him to tell us all about it. I wonder if he knows all about the cave, and whether they pickled corpses up there in his time.”

The boys would have gone down to the shore again after their early dinner, but their aunt had another suggestion to make.

“Mrs. Polperran has been in, and wants you all to go to the rectory for the afternoon, and have tea in the garden. I said I would send you all, so that you can make friends with your little playfellows.”

“Who is Mrs. Poll-parrot ?” asked Pickles, with a sly look in his eyes.

“Polperran, dear. Mr. Polperran is our clergyman, and his children are Esther’s little friends, and will be your friends too.”

“The Rev. Poll-parrot,” said Puck under his breath ; and then both boys went off into fits of laughter.

“I don’t think you ought to speak like that,

Puck," said Mrs. St. Aiden, with mild reproof. "You must remember he is a clergyman, and you must be respectful."

Puck's blue eyes twinkled. It did not seem as though he had very much respectfulness in his composition; but he did not reply. Both the boys treated the gentle invalid with more consideration than they seemed disposed to bestow upon anybody else. They did nothing more free and easy than to dub her "Aunt Saint," and though Mrs. St. Aiden suggested that Aunt Alicia would be better, she did not stand out against the other appellation.

"You look like a saint on a church window," Pickle remarked judicially, "so it seems to fit you better;" and Mrs. St. Aiden smiled indulgently, for it was less trouble to give way than to insist.

It was with some trepidation that Esther conducted her young charges to the rectory that day. The little Polperrans had been so very well brought up, and were so "proper behaved"—as Genefer called it—themselves, that she was fearful of the effect that might be produced upon

them by the words and ways of the newly-imported pair.

Mrs. Polperran herself came out to welcome them upon their approach, and Pickle, when introduced, went boldly up to her with outstretched hand.

“How do you do, Mrs. Poll-parrot? Is this the cage you live in?”

Now Mrs. Polperran was just a little hard of hearing, so that she only caught the drift of the speech, and not the exact words, and she smiled and nodded her head.

“Yes, dear; this is my house, and that is the garden where you will often come and play, I hope; and there is an orchard beyond with a swing in it; and here are your little friends all ready to make your acquaintance,” and she indicated her three children, who had been close beside her all the time.

Prissy's face was rather red, and Bertie had his handkerchief tucked into his mouth in a very odd way, whilst Milly was looking divided between the desire to laugh and the fear of Prissy; however, Mrs. Polperran did not observe these

small signs, but told her children to take care of their little guests, and sailed back to the house herself, where there was always work to be done.

“Pretty poll! pretty poll! Scratch a poll, polly!” cried Puck softly, capering on the grass-plot as the lady disappeared.

“You are a very rude little boy,” said Prissy with an air of displeasure and a glance at Esther, as much as to ask her why she did not reprove such impertinence; but Bertie made a dash at Puck, seized him by the hand, and cried out,—

“Come along! come along! Oh, won’t we have some fun now!”

Immediately the three boys dashed off together full tilt, and Milly, after a wavering glance in the direction of her sister and Esther, rushed headlong after them. The elder pair were left for the moment alone, and Prissy looked inquiringly into Esther’s flushed face.

“I don’t think your cousins are very nice boys,” she remarked with some severity; “I should think they have been very badly brought up.”

Esther felt a little tingle of vexation at hear-

ing her cousins thus criticised, though after all she was not quite sure that she could deny Prissy's charge.

“ They have no mother, you see,” she said.

“ Ah, well, perhaps that does make a difference. Fathers often spoil their children, when there is no mother ; I've heard mama say so herself,” she said. “ You will have to be a little mother to them, Esther, and teach them better. I'm not going to hear my mother called names, and I shall tell them so.”

Prissy proceeded to do this with great firmness when the children met a little later. Pickle listened to her speech with most decorous gravity, while Puck's pretty face dimpled all over with laughter.

“ Pretty polly ! pretty polly !—doesn't she talk well ! ” he exclaimed ; and to Prissy's infinite astonishment and dismay, Milly and Bertie rolled to and fro in helpless mirth, whilst Pickle looked up in her flushed face and said,—

“ You know little poll-parrots are called love-birds. It isn't pretty-behaved at all to get so angry about it.—Scratch her poll, Tousle ; per-

haps that'll put her in a better temper. Why, she's sticking her feathers up all over ; she'll peck somebody next ! ” and Pickle made a show of drawing back in fear, whilst his admirers became perfectly limp with laughter.

It was the first time the younger pair had ever tasted of the sweets of liberty. Without exactly knowing it, they had been under Prissy's rule from their babyhood upwards. It had been as natural to them to obey her as to obey their mother, and they had come to regard her almost in the light of a grown-up person whose word must, as a matter of course, be law. And yet the germs of rebellion must surely have been in their hearts, or they would hardly have sprung up so quickly.

“ We never have any fun at home,” said Bertie, in a subdued whisper, when the boys and Milly had had their tea and had taken themselves off to the farthest corner of the orchard ; “ whenever we think of anything nice to do, Prissy always says we mustn't.”

“ Why do you tell her ? ” asked Puck, and at that Bertie and Milly exchanged glances. It had

never occurred to them as possible to keep anything from Prissy.

“ We mean to have some fun here, Puck and I,” said Pickle, “ and we shan’t go and tell everything beforehand. We tell when it’s done. It’s a much better way.”

Milly and Bertie sat open-mouthed in admiration at such audacity and invention.

“ I never thought of that ! ” said Milly softly.

“ We thought of it a long time ago,” said Puck, with a touch of pride and patronage in his voice.

“ Well,” said Pickle suddenly, “ you don’t seem such a bad pair of youngsters ; so suppose we let you know when we’ve got our next plan on hand, and you come too.”

“ Oh ! ” cried Milly, and “ Oh ! ” cried Bertie. A look of slow rapture dawned upon their faces. They realized that a time of glorious emancipation was at hand, when they might be able to get into mischief like other happy little boys and girls.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SWEETS OF FREEDOM.

“ You can do as you like, Milly ; but I shall go ! ”

Small Herbert set his foot to the ground with a gesture of immovable firmness. Milly watched him with admiring eyes, still halting between two opinions.

“ Oh, but, Bertie, isn't it naughty ? ”

“ I don't care if it is. I'm going. ”

It was like hoisting the signal of revolt—revolt from the rule of the elder sister. They both knew that Prissy would never go, or let them go either, if she knew of the plan. And to slip away unknown to her, though not a difficult matter upon a Saturday afternoon, would mark an epoch in the life of this pair of properly-brought-up children, as both instinctively felt, though they could not have expressed themselves upon the subject.

“ It’s our holiday afternoon,” said Bertie stoutly, his square face looking squarer than ever. “ Nobody’s told us never to go out of the orchard ; we’re allowed to know Pickle and Puck. They say they’re going out for a lark on Saturday afternoon, and I’m going with them.”

Milly’s eyes were growing brighter and brighter ; she looked with open admiration upon Herbert. He was younger than herself, but at this moment he seemed the older of the pair.

“ Bertie,” she asked, in a voice that was little above a whisper, “ what *is* a lark ? ”

Bertie hesitated a moment.

“ It’s something we don’t ever get here,” he answered, with a note of resentment in his voice ; “ but Pickle and Puck know all about it, and I mean to learn too.”

“ O Bertie !—and so will I ! ”

“ That’s right. I’d like you to come too. I don’t see why you should be a little cockney any more than I ! ”

“ O Bertie ! what’s that ? ”

“ Well, I don’t just exactly know ; but it’s something I heard father say.”

“ What did he say ? ”

“ Well, I'll tell you. I was in his study learning my Latin declension ; and I was behind the curtain, and I think he'd forgotten I was there. Mother came in, and they talked, and I stopped my ears and was learning away, when I heard them say something about Puck and Pickle. Then I listened.”

“ What did they say ? ”

“ Mother was saying she was afraid they were naughty, rude boys, and would teach us mischief ; and then father laughed and said he didn't much mind if they did.”

“ O Bertie ! ”

“ He did, I tell you,” answered Bertie, swelling himself out, as though he felt his honor called in question. “ They talked a good while, and I couldn't understand it all ; but I heard father say he'd rather I were a bold Cornish boy, even if I did get into mischief sometimes, than grow up a little timid cockney.”

“ I wonder what he meant,” said Milly in an awestruck tone ; “ I never heard of a cockney before.”

“I think it must mean something like a girl,” said Bertie, with a note of perhaps unconscious contempt in his voice, “for mother said something, and then father said, ‘You see, you were brought up a cockney yourself, my dear, and you can do as you like about the girls; but I want Herbert to be a true Cornish boy, and he doesn’t seem to be one yet.’ That’s what he said; and now I’m going to find out what it is to be a Cornish boy, and I’m going to be one. You can go on being a cockney if you like.”

“But I won’t!” cried Milly rebelliously; “I’ll be a Cornish boy too!”

“You can’t be a boy, but you can come along with us if you like,” said Bertie patronizingly; “Pickle and Puck said you could, though Puck did say he thought girls cried and spoiled things after a bit.”

“I don’t cry!” answered Milly sturdily; and, indeed, she had most of her father in her of the three Polperran children. They had been brought up under the rule of a mother who had very strict ideas of training and discipline, and had lived the greater part of her life in towns, so that country

ways would always be more or less strange to her. They had never run wild, even now that they had returned to their father's native county, and were in the midst of moors and crags, and almost within sound of the sea. They still kept to their prim little walks along the road, and if they played out of doors, it was always in the orchard—never on the open moorland, or by the rocks and pools of the shore.

Prissy was really a little copy of her mother, and she had no taste for anything strange, and was rather afraid of solitude and of the boom of the sea. So she kept her younger pair well in hand, and they had never seriously thought of rebellion until the arrival upon the scene of Pickle and Puck.

From that moment the horizon of their lives seemed to widen. Here were two boys who actually dared to call their mother Mrs. Poll-parrot to her face, and their father the Reverend Poll! They habitually spoke of their own father as Crump, and had dubbed the redoubtable Mr. Trelawny "Old Bobby"!

These were flights of boldness beyond the

wildest dreams of the little Polperrans. At first they had been almost overcome with fear, but familiarity had changed that feeling into one of growing wonder and admiration. For these boys were not only bold in word—they were daring beyond expression in deed. Already they had explored some of the hidden mysteries of the Crag; they had been out lobster-catching with old Pollard; and they had tumbled into one of the deep pools in the rocks, and had been hauled out dripping by a fisherman who luckily chanced to be near at hand. Now they were learning to swim, Mr. Trelawny having decided that that must be the next step in their education; and although they had not had many lessons, Pickle could already keep himself afloat several strokes, and Puck was not far behind.

And all this had been done in three weeks, as well as other minor acts, of which the heroes themselves thought simply nothing, though Bertie and Milly were filled with admiration.

Prissy disapproved of them utterly and entirely; nor was this very difficult to understand. She gave herself the sort of airs which Pickle and

Puck openly ridiculed. They persisted in calling her "Pretty Polly," and she retaliated by calling them rude, ill-mannered boys, and openly pitying Esther for the infliction of their company.

"If Prissy would be nice to them, they would be nice to her," Milly remarked sagely once, "and then things would be better. But they always get quarreling, and then it's no good trying to settle anything. Everything goes wrong."

"That's because Prissy is such a cockney," cried Bertie, airing his new word with satisfaction; "Esther would never make half the fuss about every little thing. Pickle and Puck like Esther, though they do laugh at her rather. But they won't have either Esther or Prissy with them when we have our lark on Saturday afternoon. They'll only take you and me."

"Well, I'll go!" cried Milly, throwing to the winds all allegiance to Prissy; "I want to see what a lark is like. I'm tired of being a cockney."

"Hurrah!" cried Bertie, feeling all the glow that follows a bold stand against domestic tyranny; "we'll all have a regular lark together,

and we'll tell father all about it afterwards. He won't scold, and then mother can't."

Saturday afternoon was the children's holiday. At the Hermitage lessons went on regularly now on every morning of the week, and five afternoons; and it was the same at the rectory, where father and mother taught their children, or superintended their lessons when not able to be with them the whole time. But on Saturday afternoons all were free to do as they pleased.

Prissy always went with her mother to give out the books at the lending library, of which she was practically librarian, and very proud of her position. Esther was always busy at home with little household duties, which she had less time for now during the week. This left the younger children quite free to follow out their own plans, and so far they had spent their holiday afternoon together. Once they had played in the orchard, and once they had gone down to the shore, where the pair from the Hermitage had displayed to their admiring companions the progress they had made in the art of swimming.

"I mean to ask father to let me learn to swim

too," said Herbert, whose ideas were soaring to untold heights. "I'm sure that would be one way of growing to be a Cornish boy. All the boys and men here can swim."

Pickle and Puck, however, had no intention of wasting all half-holidays in such peaceful and unadventurous fashion, and they had given out very decidedly that on the following Saturday they should have "a lark." They had not further specified what form this lark was to take, but had merely declared their willingness that Herbert and Milly should share it, provided they wouldn't go and talk of it beforehand.

"We don't want Miss Prig sticking her nose into our business anyhow," said Pickle, using a second name they had recently evolved for Prissy. "We'll go where we like, and do what we like, and when we get home we'll tell them all about it. That's what Puck and I always do, and it's much the best plan. Grown-ups are always worrying after you if you say a word. They'll be much happier if they think we are safe here in the orchard."

It had been a moot point all the week with

Bertie and Milly whether or not they should dare to join in the projected "lark"; but Bertie's resolution was now irrevocably taken, and Milly threw prudence and subservience to the four winds, and swore adhesion to the new league of liberty.

They met in the rectory orchard, whither Pickle and Puck were supposed to be going to spend the Saturday afternoon. Esther was at ease about them there, for she had a belief that in that house everything went by routine, and that Herbert and Milly would restrain their comrades from any overt acts of independence and daring. There were rabbits to be visited, and cows to be driven in from the glebe pasture, and various other mild delights which always seemed quite exciting to her. She let her charges go with an easy mind; and as for Prissy, it never so much as occurred to her that after her admonition, "Mind you are very good!" Milly or Bertie would venture to dream of such a thing as leaving the premises unknown to anybody in the house, and without obtaining leave.

Pickle and Puck arrived, brimming over with excitement and the delights of anticipation.

“Where is everybody?” they asked at once.

“They’re all out,” answered Milly, skipping about. “There’s nobody to stop us or say ‘don’t.’ What are we going to do? Have you decided?”

“Of course we have. We’re going to get a boat, and go out to that island where those jolly rocks are, and where nobody lives. We’ve got some jolly cakes and things in this basket. We shall light a fire of dried seaweed, and be cast-aways from a wreck, and have a scrumptious time till it’s time to go home again.”

Bertie’s eyes grew round with anticipation. Milly jumped into the air with delight; but then suddenly looking grave, she exclaimed,—

“But how shall we get there?”

“In a boat, of course.”

“But then we shall have to have a man with us, and that costs such a lot of money.”

“Come along, silly-billy!” cried Pickle with good-humored scorn; “you’ll soon see how we do things, Puck and I. A man, indeed! As though we’d have a great lumbering gowk to spoil all our fun, and have to pay him too! No fear!”

Pickle took a short cut across country towards the shore. It was safer than the road in many ways, and the path he selected did not lead to the fishing village, but to a little cove half a mile away to the right. Milly danced beside him chattering gleefully.

“O Pickle, can you row yourself?”

“Of course I can. Puck and I rowed old Pol-lard’s boat about for him the other day amongst the lobster-pots. Anybody can row—at least anybody with any sense. You only have to put the oar in the water and pull it out again. Even a girl could do that.”

“We’ve never been let try,” said Milly. “We hardly ever go in a boat. Mother doesn’t like it. Sometimes father takes us out on a fine evening, but not often. He’s busy, and mother generally thinks it too cold or damp or something.”

“I’m glad I wasn’t brought up in a poll-parrot’s cage,” was Pickle’s remark; “your mother seems worse than Aunt Saint, and she’s pretty silly about boys.”

“I believe mother was a cockney,” said Milly

gravely. "Perhaps that is why, though I don't quite know what a cockney is."

Pickle laughed, but they were going too fast for much conversation. It was rough walking, but they did not want to lose time.

"Here we are!" shouted Pickle, as they came suddenly upon a little cleft in the fringe of moorland they were skirting, and could see right down to the shining sea. "Here's the place, and here's the old boat. I've settled with the old fellow for it, and he promised to leave the oars and things in all ready. Oh, jolly! jolly! jolly! Now we'll have a lark!"

This little creek was an offshoot of the bay, and a small tumble-down hut stood just beneath the overhanging crags. A boat lay rocking in the water, moored to a ring in the rock, and the owner had been true to his promise, and had left the oars and rudder and stretchers all in place.

With shouts of ecstasy the children tumbled in. This was something like independence! Not a creature was there to say them nay. They were afloat in a boat of their very own, about to row over to that enchanted and enchanting island

which Millie and Bertie had often gazed at wonderingly and wistfully, but had never dreamed of exploring in their own persons.

The boat was a safe old tub, heavy and cumbersome, but steady in the water. The sea was very smooth, and the tide was falling, so that the efforts of the youthful rowers to get clear of the creek were crowned with success, although Pickle and Puck had only very elementary ideas as to rowing.

Bertie took the rudder, and as he had sometimes steered the boat when his father rowed them about the bay, he had some idea of keeping a straight course, and avoiding rocks and buoys. The island looked quite near to shore from the cliffs above ; but it seemed rather a long way off when the boat was on the water, slowly traveling out towards it. Pickle and Puck soon cast off their coats and waistcoats, and the drops stood upon their brows ; but they would not be beaten, and pulled on manfully, though they did feel as though the island must be behaving in a very shabby manner, and retiring gradually from them as they approached.

Still, the delight of being out in a boat by themselves made amends for much, and Milly, who had taken her place in the bows, screamed aloud with joy and excitement.

She looked over the edge, and cried out that there were the loveliest things to be seen along the bottom. She would have been happy enough on the water the whole afternoon; but the two rowers were very glad when, after prolonged and gallant efforts on their part, they at last felt the keel of the boat grating upon the longed-for shore.

"I'm hot and thirsty, I know!" cried Pickle; "I shall have a swim first thing. There's a jolly pool. I shall just swim about there, I can swim across it, I believe, and it isn't deep anywhere."

"I'll come too!" cried Puck; "I'm just sweating all over!"

"Prissy says people oughtn't to bathe when they're hot," remarked Milly doubtfully; but Pickle only laughed and said,—

"Pretty Polly talks an awful lot of rubbish. The hotter you are the jollier it is. You come along too, Bert."

Bertie drew his breath hard. This was indeed freedom! Milly would have loved to join the party, but desisted from motives of propriety. She had not brought her bathing dress, and, indeed, she was hardly ever allowed to use it at any time. So she went off to explore the wonders of the island, leaving the boys to enjoy their bath and dry themselves in the hot sunshine afterwards.

“I wish I were a boy too,” she said to herself; “but anyhow I won’t be a little cockney, even if I am a girl.”

Certainly the island was a most entrancing place. There were pools where sea-anemones displayed their flower-like beauty, and others lined with green seaweed that looked like moss, where little fishes swam about, and shrimps turned somersaults, and limpets stuck tight to the side, as though a part of the solid rock. Then on the top of the island, where the water never came, a coarse kind of grass grew, and some little flowers and sea-poppies; and Milly found many treasures in the way of tiny shells, which would make lovely decorations for the doll’s house at home.

She could have enjoyed herself for hours like this ; but the boys turned up before very long, rosy and wet-headed from their bath, and declared they must have something to eat quick, and that they must make a fire and boil their very tiny kettle, just for the sake of feeling that they really were castaways upon a desert island.

“ I’ve found some water that isn’t salt ! ” cried Milly ; “ it’s in a deep pool above high-water mark. It must be rain-water, I suppose ; but it’s quite nice, for I drank some.” And Pickle gave a shout of joy, for the boys were terribly thirsty, and though they had provided themselves with a kettle and some tea, they had never thought of bringing water. Puck said that sea-water boiled would be sure to be quite nice, for boiling was sure to take the salt out of it somehow.

Milly, however, knew better, and was proud of her find ; and she and Puck ran off to fill the kettle, whilst Pickle and Bertie set to gathering dry seaweed, and putting it in a hole in the rocks which was rather like a fire-grate, and over which they could easily put on the kettle to boil.

It was tremendously exciting and interesting



"Pickle soon had a merry little fire burning."—Page 95.

Esther's Charge.

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work—the sort of play the rectory children had never indulged in before, though they had secretly longed after it.

“I’m the captain, and you’re the bo’sun, Bertie,” explained Pickle; “Puck’s the cabin-boy, and Milly’s a passenger. Everybody else has been drowned dead, and we’ve been cast ashore on the island. So we have to light a fire as a signal to any passing ship to come and take us off.”

“Oh, but we don’t want to be taken off!” shrieked Milly; “we want to stay all the afternoon! If they see our fire perhaps they’ll come too soon. We don’t want that.”

However, Pickle decreed that this risk must be run, as they must have their tea, and all castaways lighted a fire when they could. He had matches ready, and very soon the dry seaweed kindled, and a merry little fire was soon burning in the hole. It was not long before the kettle boiled, and very proud was Milly of being permitted to put in the tea, and officiate at the dispensing of the liquid.

They had only one mug, and some lumps of sugar, and no milk; but that mattered very little.

Castaways could not expect luxuries, and the cakes were excellent.

Bertie was in rampant spirits. This was true liberty, and he was eager for remaining on the island permanently. There was a hole on the other side where they could sleep upon a bed of dried seaweed; and then in the mornings they could bathe in the pool, and he could learn to swim, and Milly could cook their food, and they would catch fish, and crabs, and shrimps, and live like princes.

Puck was rather taken by the idea.

“We shouldn’t have any lessons then with the old Owl,” he remarked. “I don’t like lessons. It’s such a waste of time, when one might be having fun. I can’t see what good lessons are to anybody. I asked Crump once if he remembered the dates of all the kings and queens, and he said he was afraid he didn’t, though he could have said them off pat when he was my age. If one may forget everything as soon as one grows up, what’s the use of making such a fuss about learning them?”

“Crump says it trains the mind to learn,” said

Pickle, jumping up ; “ but I should think living on an island and doing everything for oneself would train it much more. Let’s go and see the hole, Bert. P’r’aps we won’t stay to-day—we’ve not brought quite enough things ; but we might collect them here for a bit, and then when we’ve got enough we might come over, and let the boat go adrift, and live like cave-men as long as we liked. It would do for our city of refuge, you know,” and he looked across at Puck, who capered in great glee.

“ Of course, of course, of course ! ” he shouted ; “ we ought to have a city of refuge ! ”

“ What’s that ? ” asked Bertie eagerly.

“ Oh, it’s all in the Bible,” answered Puck. “ We found it one day, and told Crump ; and we asked if we might have one, and he said yes, if we could find it ; and so we made it. It was out on the stable roof—such a jolly place !—no avenger of blood could ever get up there. Crump did try once ; but he stuck fast, and we sat and roared at him. It was a fine city of refuge. We always went there when people were angry. Once we were up there nearly all day ; and if we’d had

more gingerbread we'd never have come down till they'd promised not to punish us. But Miss Masters sat at the bottom of the ladder that time, and she whipped us when we had to come down. That was what I call being real mean. What's the good of a city of refuge if the avenger of blood sits waiting for you at the bottom of the ladder? We asked Crump to tell her never to do it again, but I don't know if he ever did. Soon after that we came here, and the old Owl teaches us instead."

"And you haven't got a city of refuge here?" asked the breathless Milly.

"No; but I think we shall want one," said Pickle seriously. "There's something about Old Bobby and the Owl that I don't quite like. They can be very jolly; but they seem to think they're going to have it very much their own way. I don't like giving in to a pair of old fogies like that. I think this island might come in very useful."

"Prissy could never find us here!" cried Milly under her breath; "we could do the loveliest things! Oh, do let us have a city of refuge!"

They explored the island with breathless interest. It seemed an excellent place for their design. There was no danger of its ever being covered at high tide ; there was a rent in one side, not quite a cave, but a deep fissure, which would give protection from wind and some shelter from rain, and prove an excellent place of concealment. There was the big pool for bathing in, and little pools for keeping their treasures in the way of anemones and other sea-water creatures. And though the tides might wash away the old treasures, there would be new ones deposited instead, and altogether it seemed a most desirable sort of place.

“ We’ll collect things here,” said Pickle with decision. “ That was the worst of our other city of refuge ; there was no place to keep anything. We had just to carry up with us what we wanted, and unless we could get down into the house without being seen we couldn’t get anything more. Once Jim, the stable-boy, brought us some apples ; but he didn’t generally know when we were up there. We’ll lay in a regular store of things, and then if they get cross we can come

here and stop for a week. They'll be so frightened by that time that they'll never think of being angry when we get back, if we don't stay here always."

"Are you sure?" asked Milly eagerly. "I feel as though mother would get angrier and angrier the longer we stayed away."

But Pickle looked immensely wise.

"No, it isn't like that," he said; "they begin by getting angrier and angrier, but then they get frightened, and when they're just as frightened as they can be, then if you go back they don't scold—at least hardly at all. They're only all in a tremble lest you've got wet or something like that—as if one were a cat. It's very stupid of them, but it's very convenient for us. You get more fun and less scolding that way."

"O Pickle! how do you know?"

"Oh, we've tried it so often, and with different nurses and governesses, and with Granny and Crump. We know all about that sort of thing. Crump was the worst to reckon on. He would sometimes say very little that day, but take it out of you next. But then Crump was Crump, and

one never minded much what he did. I wish we had him here now."

"Would he let you have a city of refuge out here?" asked Milly wonderingly.

"Of course he would. Crump isn't like a pack of silly women, who always think one is going to kill oneself. Crump likes boys to do things for themselves, and not be always hanging round and asking other people to take care of them. I'm going to be a soldier when I grow up, and soldiers have to learn how to do lots of things; and Puck will be either a soldier or a sailor. Crump said we might choose for ourselves; and when we had chosen we must stick to it like bricks, and so we will."

"I'm going to be a Cornish boy!" cried Bertie; "my father said so. Cornish boys can all swim, and row boats, and wrestle, and things like that. We'll learn all about that at the city of refuge. It's the women who spoil everything. Let's pass a law that no woman shall ever be allowed to set foot on our island."

"Then you mustn't count me a woman!" cried Milly appealingly.

"Of course not!" answered all the boys at once; and Pickle went on judicially—"We shan't count all girls as women—only the very stupid ones like Pretty Polly. Tousele may come as a visitor sometimes; and you may come always, Milly, if you'll be jolly and not tell secrets. I don't count people like you women. You have some sense."

"And perhaps if you get regularly jolly, you won't ever be a woman," added Puck consolingly. "I should think there must be some way of stopping it. When Old Bobby or the Owl are in good temper I'll ask them about it. They have all sorts of funny things in bottles and tanks, and they can do lots of queer things. I'll ask them if they can't do something to stop you always being a woman. You'd like that very much, wouldn't you?"

"Oh yes!" cried Milly eagerly. "If I could be a Cornish boy I should be quite happy."

But time was flying fast, and, unless the children wanted their secret to escape them too soon, they would have to be going back. They had had a fine time out on the island, and the tide

had begun to flow again, and had floated their boat, which, for above an hour, had been lying stranded amid the rocks.

So in they all tumbled, and rowed back homewards, reaching the creek as the clock in the village church chimed out the hour of six.

“We shall just get home in time!” cried Milly, “and nobody will know we haven’t been playing about near home all the time.—Pickle, may we tell father about the city of refuge—just as a secret? I’m sure he won’t mind; and if he doesn’t tell mother it will be all right.”

“Well, I’ll think about it,” answered Pickle, in his capacity of captain; “but don’t you tell anything till I give you leave.”

CHAPTER V.

A T T H E C R A G.

“ You must come, Tousle ; you must, you must, you must ! ”

The boys were dancing round her like a pair of wild Indians, and Esther gave up the unequal struggle.

“ I’ll come if you want me very much,” she said rather wearily, “ but I think you’d enjoy yourselves just as much without me.”

“ Well, it’s not so much that we couldn’t do without you ourselves,” returned Puck, with his habitual candor ; “ but Old Bobby says he won’t have us without our keeper, and that means you, though I’m sure I don’t know why he should call you that.”

“ Nor I,” answered Esther, shaking her head. She felt very little power over the mercurial pair whom she had vainly tried to make her charge.

They were fond of her, in a fashion, and she was fond of them. Their arrival had brought a new element into her life ; and there were many happy hours when they played together joyously, and Esther forgot her gravity and grown-up ways, and laughed and raced about and shouted gleefully, as other children do.

Yet it could not be denied that the boys brought many new anxieties into her life, and the uncertainty as to what they would do next kept her upon tenter-hooks from week's end to week's end.

They did not want to give trouble and pain ; they only wanted to amuse themselves and to be left alone. They were accustomed to liberty and independence, and were on the whole very well able to take care of themselves. But they were full of spirit, and they delighted in mischief ; and something in the prim and proper methods prevailing in this little place stirred up the spirit of mischief within them, and led them to commit more pranks, perhaps, than they would otherwise have thought of.

Mrs. St. Aiden took things easily, fortunately

for Esther. The boys amused her. She did not see very much of them, and on the whole they behaved nicely towards her, having received rather explicit commands on this point from their father.

They could not always restrain their mischievous devices even where she was concerned. One morning when her breakfast-tray was brought up, and she uncovered the plate where some little hot dainty generally reposed, behold there was a large toad sitting upon an empty plate, and gazing at her with its jewel-like eyes; and the shout of laughter which followed upon her startled scream betrayed the presence of the lurking conspirators, who had deftly made an exchange of plates whilst Esther's back was turned, just before she took the tray up-stairs.

Still, in spite of sundry tricks of this sort, Mrs. St. Aiden did not object on the whole to the presence of the boys in the house. She liked to hear their racy accounts of what they did from day to day, and there was always Mr. Trelawny to fall back upon if they threatened to become too much for her.

A long afternoon at the Crag had been promised to the boys for some while, on the first half-holiday when their conduct through the week had won them the right to the treat.

Mr. Earle was to be the judge on this point, and it was some time before he could honestly say it was deserved. Mr. Earle was exciting Esther's admiration by the way he was obtaining the upper hand of the restless and obstreperous boys.

At first they had obviously regarded lesson hours as so much time for the invention of tricks for the interruption of study, and the playing off of practical jokes. But gradually they had come to an understanding that their tutor regarded matters differently, and that he had just as definite ideas as they upon the subject. Then had come a certain battle of wills between the belligerents, and little by little it became evident that the tutor was becoming the victor. He did not often have to resort to corporal chastisement, though he had once given Pickle a sound caning for insubordination, and Puck had had two or three good cuts across his grubby little hand. But he had other ways of showing that he meant to be mas-

ter in study hours ; and Esther had come to have a great admiration for him, and a sense of confidence in his presence, although the halo of dread which surrounded all persons connected with the Crag still continued to cling about him.

It had been a great relief to her when Saturday after Saturday Mr. Earle had looked through his mark book and had shaken his head at the proposal of the promised treat. She did not want Pickle and Puck to be naughty, but she did not in the least want to go up with them to spend the afternoon at Mr. Trelawny's house. And yet it was understood that she was to accompany the boys, "to keep them in order," as the master of the house said, though Esther knew perfectly that if anybody succeeded in keeping the pair in order it would be himself or Mr. Earle.

"He likes you, Tousle," said Pickle shrewdly ; "he likes you a lot better than us. I don't think he cares for us a bit ; but he's fond of you. I can't think why you don't like him."

"I never said I didn't like him," said Esther nervously.

"No ; but anybody not a fool could see it with

half an eye. I can't think why you don't. He's an awfully jolly old boy, for all he's so gruff and such an old tyrant. He'd like you to like him I'm sure. I can't think why you don't."

"You'd much better," advised Puck, "or perhaps you'll make him angry, and then he might put you into one of his tanks and use you for his experiments. I think it's silly of you always to run away and hide when he comes. He's always asking where you have gone to, and when we tell him you're hiding away from him, he looks as if he didn't quite like it, though he always laughs his big, gruff laugh."

"O Puck! why do you tell?"

"Well, we must speak the truth," said Puck with an air of virtue; "and you know you do always scuttle away when he comes."

"Never mind," cried Pickle, who was in a mighty hurry to be off; "come along now, and let's go up. We may go any time after dinner, you know."

"It's so hot!" said Esther with a little sigh. "Would it do if I came a little later? The sun makes my head ache."

“ Oh, but it's all in the wood, and I don't believe he'll have us without you. Do come along. Boys never have headaches. I don't see why girls should have either.”

Esther yielded. She did not want to spoil the boys' holiday afternoon, but she did wish that her going with them had not been a condition. Her fears of the Crag and its master did not diminish from the things she heard dropped by older people about the things going on there, now that Mr. Trelawny had an assistant in his experiments. The scientific names she heard spoken sounded terrible in her ears ; and she pictured the two men in their gloomy cave, sitting up all the night through pursuing wonderful and mysterious researches, and her books of historical romance, which told of the secret machinations of wizards and magicians, acquired for her a new fascination and a new terror.

The three children started off through the pine woods, but Esther was soon left far behind. The boys clambered hither and thither, rushing about with the inexhaustible energy of children ; but Esther's feet lagged wearily, and her small

face was pale. There were shadows beneath her eyes, and she pulled off her hat and fanned herself with it, thinking the way to the Crag had never seemed so long before.

Esther's head had taken to aching a good deal of late. At night she could not always sleep. Her lessons seemed to dance before her eyes, and she would dream about them even after she got off to slumber-land.

It had been a great pleasure to Esther to have regular lessons with somebody like Mr. Earle, who could explain everything she wanted to know, and who never reproved her for asking questions ; but perhaps the strain of regular work, in addition to that of the two boys in the house and the anxiety she was often in about them and their doings, was rather much for her. At any rate, she had been feeling her head a good deal for the past fortnight, and would so much rather have spent the afternoon quietly at home than have faced first the long walk up the hill and then all the tremors and excitements of the Crag.

But Esther was not accustomed to think first of herself, and she plowed her way bravely up-

wards, till at last they arrived in front of the grim-looking old house perched upon its crag, and saw the two gentlemen sitting out on the terrace, rather as though waiting for their guests.

The boys gave a whoop and a bound, and dashed towards them. When Esther reached the terrace they were both swarming about Mr. Trelawny like a pair of young monkeys. He was laughing in his rather grim fashion, and Esther heard him saying in his deep voice,—

“No, I won’t have that impudence from you, you young jackanapes. If your father lets you behave so, he ought to know better. When I was a boy we were made to respect our elders, and if we couldn’t do it, we had to keep it to ourselves. You may call me Uncle Bob, if you like, as my name happens to be Robert; but every time you call me Old Bobby you’ll get a good sound box on the ear—so now you understand.”

The boys laughed, but they knew perfectly that Mr. Trelawny was in earnest, and that he would be as good as his word. They had found out that from Mr. Earle, who had absolutely for-

bidden the use of nicknames in school hours, and had insisted that they should speak of Esther by her proper name, and address him as Mr. Earle—a thing that seemed to astonish them not a little.

Out of school hours, however, they considered that they had full liberty of speech, and the next minute Puck exclaimed,—

“Here’s Tousle coming along. She didn’t want to come a bit. We had to bully her into it. She can’t bear the Crag.”

A quick flush mounted to Esther’s cheek as she heard, and her heart beat fast. How she did wish the boys would not say such things! She didn’t seem able to make them understand how terrifying it was for her that Mr. Trelawny should be told of her shrinking from him and his house. Shyness with Esther was like a real physical pain, and she would rather have received a sharp blow than be obliged to face Mr. Trelawny after these words had just been spoken.

He threw the boys from him, and went and took her by the hand.

“Well, little Miss Esther, and how do you do?”

You are quite a stranger here. We must make you change your opinion of the Crag and its owner. Now you shall tell me what you would like to do and to see, since you are here."

"Oh, thank you, but I don't mind," answered Esther nervously. "I like sitting here and watching the beautiful sea."

"Well, we'll sit here till you have cooled down, and we have drunk our coffee, and then we will see if we can't find something more exciting to amuse ourselves."

A man-servant came out almost immediately, bearing cups of coffee on a tray; and this was very good, with plenty of milk and sugar for the little people. The boys chattered away, and Esther found herself able to sit in a quiet corner and be silent, for if ever Mr. Trelawny asked her a question, Pickle or Puck always broke in with an answer before she could get in a word.

Presently the boys could be quiet no longer.

"Come along and show us things," they cried, getting upon the rails of Mr. Trelawny's chair, and tweaking his thick, grizzled hair. "We know you've got an awful lot of jolly things up

here. Come along and show us them. Why, even Tousle hasn't seen half, and she's lived here ever so long."

A smart rap on the knuckles brought Pickle quickly to the ground.

"Speak properly of your cousin whilst you are in my house," said Mr. Trelawny.

"What did I say?" asked Pickle, aggrieved. "Oh, bother! why can't we call people what we like? I think you're a regular old tyrant."

"Well, you needn't come near me unless you like," was the equable response; "but if you do, you'll have to behave yourself. So just you mind that."

The brothers exchanged glances; but it was evidently not diplomatic to quarrel with the master of the house at this juncture, and they felt that in the matter of argument they would get the worst of it with him. So they only made a covert grimace at the back of his head, and said,—

"Come along, then. Show us your house. We want to see all the queer old places we've heard about. Was there once a monk walled up in the cellar? and did you dig out his skeleton?"

and did his ghost go prowling about tapping on the doors and making groans ? ”

“ Not in my time,” answered Mr. Trelawny. “ There is a story about the finding of a skeleton down below, though how it came there nobody could say. It was all guess-work.—Come, little Miss Esther ; I know you are a historian, and I have some things I think will interest you,” and Mr. Trelawny held out his great hand, into which Esther was obliged to slip her little cold fingers, though she felt them trembling all over as she did so.

Mr. Trelawny looked down at her for a moment, but said nothing. The boys dashed hither and thither through the rooms, making remarks and asking questions, which they did not always wait to hear answered. But by and by they got interested in the interesting tales Mr. Trelawny had to tell about the fine old house in which he lived, and even Esther lost her fears for a while in the breathless delight of hearing the story of some of the pictured ladies and armed warriors whose portraits hung upon the walls of the corridors and rooms.

It was later on, when they were taken into the great laboratory at the top of the house, that her fears began to come back. There was a strange smell in the place, and it was full of the queerest things, the very names of which were terrible. Then Mr. Trelawny did some wonderful things with wires and lights ; and presently Mr. Earle was sent down into the cave, right at the very bottom of the house, underneath its foundations, and he and Mr. Trelawny passed messages to each other without so much as a speaking-tube or a wire between them, and everything seemed so strange and uncanny that even the boys were quite silent, whilst Esther felt as though she should be stifled in the atmosphere of this weird place.

But the boys were not frightened, though they were greatly astonished at some of the things they saw and heard. Nothing would serve them but that they must go down into the cave again themselves, and see what was going on there ; and Esther felt as though her heart would stop beating altogether as she felt her hand grasped by that of this big, terrible wizard, and knew that

he was leading her down, down, down into the very heart of the earth.

She dared not resist. His grasp was too strong for that. She was afraid if she angered him he would begin to flash more fire, and perhaps annihilate her altogether. Her teeth chattered in her mouth. Her breath came and went in great gasps. If he had not had such firm hold of her hand, she would almost have fallen.

At all times Esther had a fear of underground places. She had never done more than just peep into a cave before this; and now she was going down, down, down into the very heart of the earth—into that terrible place the boys had told her of, where all sorts of unthinkable horrors were practised, or had been in bygone days, and where, for all she knew, skeletons were still pickling in great tanks. She dared not even think of anything more.

They entered the cave through a sort of trap-door communicating with the house above. The boys were delighted to go by this way. Mr. Earle was there, moving about like a gnome in the gloom; and the voices of the boys, as they

cried out their questions, and exclaimed over the strange things they saw, sounded hollow and strange, and went echoing away down the vaulted passages, as though taken up and repeated by half a hundred unseen demons.

The air of the place seemed oppressive and difficult to breathe. The sullen booming of the sea beneath added to the awfulness of the darkness and the horror. Esther threw a few scared glances round her, and felt as though everything was swimming in a mist before her eyes. It seemed as though a cold hand was grasping at her throat, hindering her breath and numbing her limbs.

She knew that she was being walked about from place to place, but she could see nothing and hear nothing plainly. The boys were making the place ring with their shouts and strange calls, and it seemed to her as though the cave were full of dancing forms, and as though she could not breathe any longer.

Then all of a sudden it seemed to get quite dark. The sound of voices died away in her

ears. She thought she was left alone in this awful place ; perhaps she had been put into one of the tanks. She was suffocating, and could hear nothing but the wild beating of her own heart ; and then even that seemed to stop, and she remembered nothing more.

When she opened her eyes again the sun was shining, and it was all warm and bright round her, and somebody had fast hold of her, and was making her feel so comfortable and restful that she did not want to move.

She could not think where she was, but it was certainly out of doors. The wind fanned her brow, and she could see the sky and the sea and a bit of waving fern or tree.

Then there was the sound of a step close by, and suddenly Mr. Earle loomed into view, carrying a glass in his hand, and when his eyes met hers he smiled and said,—

“ Ah, that is better ! ”

And then Esther felt herself lifted up, and saw that it was Mr. Trelawny who was holding her so comfortably. He was sitting on the ground, and she was on his knee, resting against his broad

shoulder ; and now he bent and looked into her face with a smile, and said,—

“ So, so, my little girl ; that is better, that is better. Now drink what Mr. Earle has brought you, and you will feel yourself again.”

Esther held out her hand obediently, but it shook so much that Mr. Earle would not give the glass into her hand, but knelt down on one knee and held it to her lips. It was not nice medicine at all, and it made her choke and cough when she had swallowed it, but it seemed to warm her all through ; and when she had finished the draught she felt able to lift up her head, though it was rather appalling to find herself alone out on the hillside, with only Mr. Trelawny and Mr. Earle beside her.

She remembered everything now—the terrible cave, the strange sights and sounds there, and that feeling of giddiness and weakness which had come over her. She sat up and looked round her, and then she shivered again a little, for just behind them was a dark gap which she knew must lead into the cave. Were they going to take her back into it again ?

Mr. Earle had hold of her hand, and his finger was on the little wrist. He looked into her face with a smile, and asked,—

“What is the matter now?”

“Nothing, thank you, sir.”

“You are frightened,” he said quietly. “Were you afraid of the darkness in there just now?”

“I—I don’t know if it was the darkness exactly. I think it was everything.” She made another little movement, and then added wistfully, “Please, may I go home?”

“No hurry,” said Mr. Trelawny’s big voice just in her ear. “We will go back to my house first, and see what all this means.”

And then Esther felt herself lifted bodily in those great, strong arms, and carried baby-fashion up the steep pathway towards the house on the top of the crag.

“O Mr. Trelawny, I’m too heavy to be carried!” she cried.

“You’re not half as heavy as you should be. I must know about that too. We’ve got you a prisoner between us, my little maid, and we shall not let you go till we’ve——”

Mr. Trelawny stopped suddenly, because Mr. Earle had begun to speak to him in the strange language Esther had heard him use upon another occasion. She shut her eyes tightly, and tried to be brave ; but if only she might have gone home by herself ! The Crag was a very terrible place to come to.

Even the boys seemed to have disappeared. There was no sign of them about the great, quiet house. Mr. Trelawny carried her into the drawing-room, which did not look as though it were often used, though it was bright and sunny ; and he laid her down upon a wide sofa, and took a chair close to her. Mr. Earle stood a little way off, looking out of the window.

If Esther had had the courage to look into the face above her, she would have seen that it was full of a very kindly concern and interest, but she dared not raise her eyes. She felt like a prisoner awaiting sentence, and only wondered whether she would ever be free to run home again.

“ Now tell me, child,” said Mr. Trelawny’s big voice, “ what is the matter with my little friend ? ”

“ Nothing, thank you, sir.”

“Can’t you call me Uncle Robert, like that pair of urchins, who are no kith or kin of mine, though you are? Esther, I was very fond of your father. Won’t you try to be a little fond of me? I will be your friend, if you will let me.”

She looked up at him then, and her heart beat fast. It was all so very strange and unexpected. She did not know what to say; but she put out her hand and laid it on his, and he smiled and patted it, and said,—

“There, that is better. Now tell me about these headaches of yours. We ought to find a cure for them. Has Mr. Earle been working you too hard?”

Esther felt a thrill run through her again. How was it he knew anything about her headaches? She had not even told her mother, and it never occurred to her that the boys could have spoken the word. Yet, to be sure, once or twice lately she had not cared to join their games because her head ached so badly towards evening. But it was not the lessons. They must not think that. Her lessons were the great pleasure of her life.

“ Oh no, no ! ” she answered earnestly ; “ indeed it is not that. Please, don’t stop the lessons. I do like them so very much.”

Mr. Earle came forward then, smiling and saying,—

“ I don’t want to lose my pupil either, but health comes before pleasure—even before learning.”

“ I’m sure it isn’t the lessons,” said Esther again. “ Sometimes I think perhaps it’s my hair. It makes my head so hot, and at night I can’t always sleep.”

Mr. Trelawny lifted the heavy mass of curly locks and weighed it in his hand. He looked at Mr. Earle, and they spoke a few words together in the strange tongue.

“ Did you ever complain to your mother about your hair ? ” asked Mr. Trelawny, with a gleam in his deepset eyes.

“ Yes,” answered Esther, “ I often used to ask her if I mightn’t have it short like Milly Polperan ; but she doesn’t like me to tease about it, so I’ve given it up.”

Mr. Trelawny reached out his hand towards a

table upon which lay a pair of sharp scissors in a sheath. The gleam in his eyes was deepening. Mr. Earle said something in the foreign tongue, and he answered back in his sharp, decisive way. Esther lay still, wondering ; but they were both behind her, and she could not see.

Then came a strange, grating sound close to her head, another, and another ; and before she realized what was happening, Mr. Trelawny suddenly laid upon her lap a great mass of waving chestnut hair, exclaiming as he did so,—

“ There, my dear ! take that home to your mother with my best compliments ; and as for me, I shall have to find a new name for little Goldylocks.”

Then Esther realized that her hair had been cut off by Mr. Trelawny, and she lay looking at it with thrills of excitement running through her. What would her mother say when she got home ? and what would it feel like to be relieved of that great floating mass of hair ? How delightful to have no tugging and pulling at the knots morning and night, often when her head was aching and tender, and every pull seemed to hurt more

than the last ! She must get up and feel what it was like.

So she sat up and passed her hands over her head. Mr. Trelawny and Mr. Earle were looking at her and laughing. Esther had to laugh too ; but how light and cool it felt !

“ It is nice ! ” she exclaimed. “ I feel as if I’d got a new head ! Oh, I hope mama will not mind much ! ”

“ Look here, sir,” said Mr. Earle ; “ you’re not as good a barber as a lady had a right to expect. Give me the scissors, and let me put a more artistic finish to your work. We must send her home looking less like a hearth broom than she does at the present moment.”

They all laughed again at that, and the color began to come back into Esther’s cheeks. This was something rather exciting, and it had driven away her fears for the time being. She sat quite still whilst Mr. Earle snipped and cut, and walked round and round her, and quarreled with Mr. Trelawny about the proper way of trimming a lady’s hair ; and in the end they put her upon the sofa, and told her to look at herself in the

great mirror opposite. When she did this she began to laugh out loud.

“ Will it always stand on end like that ? ” she asked, for the wave in her hair made it set off from her face and stand round it rather like the aureole round the heads of saints in the church windows. “ I don’t think Genefer will think it tidy like that. Can’t I brush it and make it lie smooth, like Mr. Earle’s ? ”

They got a brush, but the hair set them at defiance, and stood out in its own way. But it was delightful to have no heavy mane hanging down behind. Esther declared her headache almost gone, and so she was allowed to go out and find the boys, who had been set to play by themselves for an hour.

The shrieks of delight they set up at sight of Esther with her cropped head made her laugh and glow like a child ; and she looked altogether so much brighter and merrier that the two gentlemen exchanged glances and nodded their heads, as though quite satisfied with the high-handed measure they had taken.

“ We shall call you Roundhead now ! ” cried

Puck, dancing round her in an ecstasy of amusement; but Mr. Trelawny came up and took him by the ears, saying in his gruffest way,—

“You will call your cousin by her proper name, or you will never come to my house again. Now, do you understand?”

“Do you mean really?” asked Puck, wriggling away and facing round.

“I mean really and truly,” was the emphatic answer. “You’ve got to learn manners, you two, whilst you are here; and if Mr. Earle knocks some knowledge into your thick skulls, I’ll knock a little respect for other people into your democratic little minds. So mind, if you don’t behave yourselves properly to your cousin, and speak to her properly too, you’ll never have the chance of coming to the Crag again.”

CHAPTER VI.

THE SHORN SHEEP.

“I THINK you ought to come home with us, Uncle Bob, after cutting off Esther’s tousel like that. I expect Aunt Saint will be in a jolly old wax.”

The children had finished their tea out on the terrace, and a very nice tea it had been. Esther was looking brighter than she had done at first, and a little bit of color had stolen into her face ; but her eyes still had a tired look in them, and there were dark marks underneath. Mr. Trelawny paused beside her, and passed his big hands over the cropped head. The touch was kindly, and Esther tried to conquer the little thrill of fear which ran through her. She felt as though she had behaved herself badly at the wizard’s house, and that he had been very indulgent to her when he might have been very angry. She could

not conquer her old fears all at once ; but she resolved to try and mingle some liking with them for this big, strange man, who seemed wishful to be regarded as an uncle.

“What does the shorn sheep say herself about that?” asked Mr. Trelawny, bending down to look into Esther’s face.

She made herself return the glance, and said timidly,—

“I think I should be much obliged if you would, Uncle Robert. You would explain to mama better than I can.”

A smile lit up the rugged features of the Cornishman.

“To be sure I will then, my dear. I’ll take all the blame, which is certainly all mine. I’ve got a few things I want to say to your mother, so I’ll come down now and say them.”

So when the shadows had grown a little longer, and the sea was lit up like a sheet of gold, the little party of four started down the hill again, the boys tearing about like a pair of wild animals, Mr. Trelawny following more soberly, holding Esther’s hand in his, and helping her over the

bits of rough ground ; though, as he remarked laughingly, it was “like helping a bit of thistle-down over a hedge.”

Mr. Trelawny told Esther a great many interesting things during that walk—things about birds and insects, which she had never known before. He did not frighten her at all the whole way, and when she asked a timid question he always had a full and interesting answer ready.

Then he told her that he had a number of books full of pictures of live creatures in his library, and said she must come up another day and look at them. And though Esther could never think of the Crag without a certain shrinking and fear, yet she did want to see the pictures very much, if only they would not take her into those awful underground places, or into the rooms where all those strange things went on.

When they got home, there was a sound of voices coming from the open drawing-room windows. The boys had rushed headlong in, and now came tumbling out again.

“It’s only Mrs. Poll-parrot and Pretty Polly !” cried the pair in a breath ; whereupon Mr. Tre-

lawny took the two heads, one in either hand, and knocked them pretty smartly together.

“Mind your manners, boys!” he said in his big gruff voice, and strode on, holding Esther’s hand, whilst Pickle and Puck remained behind, staring after him and rubbing their heads with an air of injured innocence.

“He’s rather an old beast sometimes, I think,” said Puck rather ruefully. “I don’t quite like him always.”

“He makes us do as he says,” added Pickle, “like Mr. Earle—I mean the Owl. I think it’s rather interfering of them.”

Meantime Mr. Trelawny had entered the window, drawing Esther after him.

“Good evening, madam,” he said in his breezy way—“good evening to you all. Mrs. St. Aiden, I have come to make my peace with you. Tell me first what you think of your shorn lamb.”

Then he pushed Esther forward, and the child stood before her mother, the color coming and going in her face rather too fast to please Mr. Trelawny, who looked at her from under his bushy brows and shook his head once or twice.

Mrs. St. Aiden gave a little gasp, almost a little scream. Mrs. Polperran stared, and began to laugh ; while Prissy cried out in unveiled astonishment,—

“ O Esther, your hair, your hair ! Where has it gone ? ”

“ Here it is,” said Mr. Trelawny, producing a packet wrapped in soft paper, and laying it upon Mrs. St. Aiden’s knee. “ I daresay some enterprising hairdresser would give a pretty penny for it. Now, Miss Prissy, you run off with your little friend here. I want to talk a little to these good ladies.”

Prissy rose, and Esther was glad to escape with her into the garden. It was delightful to have such a cool, comfortable head ; but all the talk about herself made her feel hot and shy.

“ O Esther ! ” cried Prissy, “ you do look so funny. But I’ve often heard mother say that it is bad for you having such a great head of hair. What was it made Mr. Trelawny cut it off ? Don’t you think it was taking a great liberty without your mother’s leave ? ”

“I don’t know,” answered Esther slowly. “I don’t think mama would ever have let him.”

The boys came running up now, and the four children were soon well hidden from view in the clipped yew arbor, which was Esther’s especial haunt.

“I thought he cut it off to use it in his experiments,” said Pickle. “I’ve read of magicians who took people’s hair, and then they used to burn bits of it and make them come to them in their sleep. I expect that’s what he’s done it for. I expect that you’ll often be walking up to the cave in your sleep now.”

Esther began shaking at once, but Prissy said, with her grown-up air of reproof,—

“You are talking great nonsense, Philip.” (Prissy very often called the boys Philip and Percy, to their own unspeakable disgust.) “There are no magicians now; and besides, it was all nonsense when there were any. And Mr. Trelawny gave Esther’s hair back to Mrs. St. Aiden just now. I saw him.”

But Pickle wasn’t going to be shut up like that.

“I expect he kept some of it back for him-

self," he said ; " and you needn't pretend to know such a mighty lot about Mr. Trelawny and what he can do. If he isn't a magician, he's something uncommonly like it. You should have seen the things he did to-day for us to see ; and he'd have done some funnier ones still, only *she* went and flopped down in a heap on the floor, and then they had to carry her out, and they wouldn't go back any more."

" What did you do, Esther ? " asked Prissy.

" I don't know. I felt funny down there, and everything seemed going round, and I didn't know anything about the rest."

" Well, she just spoiled the fun," said Puck. " They were going to show us some things—skeletons in the tanks, I expect, or jolly things like that—but when *she* went flop they didn't seem to think a bit about us. They hustled us away up to the house, and wouldn't show us anything more. That's always the way when there are girls. They are always sure to spoil the fun."

" I'm very sorry," said Esther penitently, " but I didn't mean to. Only I don't like underground places. They make me feel queer."

“I’ve heard father speak about Mr. Trelawny’s cave,” said Prissy. “I don’t think he likes it much. Quite a little while ago I heard him say to mother that he was afraid, now Mr. Earle had come, that there might be something horrid happening there. I can’t quite remember the words, but he said something like that. And mother said she was afraid he was reckless, and too fond of experiments. I wonder what he does there, and what father is afraid of.”

“People always are afraid of magicians and wizards,” said Pickle with a sly look of triumph at Prissy; and for a moment she was silent, feeling as though she had been somehow caught in a trap.

“Well, I think he’s a very odd sort of man; and I don’t think he’d any business to cut off your hair, Esther. Did you know he was going to do it?”

“No, I never thought of such a thing. I only said it made my head hot at nights, or something like that. And then he got a big pair of scissors and cut it all off in a minute.”

“I think it looks rather nice like that,” said

Prissy, with a critical glance, "though it does stand on end rather. I should think you would enjoy not having it combed out at nights."

"I've decided now!" cried Puck, shouting out suddenly the great new idea. "I shall call you Ess now. It'll do for Esther, and for Shorn Sheep too. Old Bobby calls you that himself now, so he can't scold us. You shall be Ess. Don't you think that's a nice, easy, short name?"

Mr. Trelawny was soon seen stalking away up the path towards the Crag, and Mrs. Polperran's voice was heard calling for Prissy. Esther stole back to her mother's side, and asked timidly,—

"You're not vexed with me, mama dear? Indeed I did not know what he was going to do."

"No, dear, I suppose not. It's no use making a trouble of it now it's done. It was certainly a liberty to take; but it's never any use being angry with Mr. Trelawny—he only laughs and makes a joke of it. Besides, he always has looked upon you rather in the light of his ward. Your father did write to him before he died, asking him to give an eye to us, and to take care of us both

if we wanted it. I suppose he thinks he has some rights over you ; and he has been very kind to us, so we must not say too much."

Esther listened very gravely. She did not know exactly what a ward might be, but she fancied that it made her in some sort the property of the redoubtable Mr. Trelawny. It was rather an alarming notion ; but Esther said nothing, for it had been her endeavor all these past months, since her father's death, never to trouble her mother needlessly.

" You should have told me about your headaches, dear," said Mrs. St. Aiden, stroking Esther's hand. " Perhaps we could have cured them then without the sacrifice of your pretty hair."

" O mama, they weren't so very bad. I didn't want to worry you. But I think I shall be much better now without my hair."

" And what made you faint in the cave, dear ? You frightened Mr. Trelawny and Mr. Earle, I think."

Esther thought it had been the other way ; but she only said, after a little hesitation,—

" There didn't seem any air down there, and it

was all so dark and queer, it made me feel funny ; but I didn't know I fainted."

"Well, I have told Mr. Trelawny not to take you there again. I have always had that sort of dislike to caves and underground places myself. Men don't understand that sort of thing ; but you had better never go there again, Esther."

"Oh, thank you, mama !" cried Esther earnestly.

It was an immense relief to feel that she need never go back to the cave, and that Mr. Trelawny had been told not to take her there. She could almost face the idea of going up to the Crag to see the books, if she were safe from that terrible place. Things seemed suddenly to be brighter and happier altogether. Esther was quite lively that evening ; and as Genefer brushed the shorn head at night she remarked,—

"Well, Miss Esther, it's made a good bit of difference to your looks ; but I always did say to the missus that it was a pity to let you grow such a mane of hair now. Very likely you would have had it grow thin and poor as you grew up ; but if you keep it cropped short for a few years,

you'll have a nice head of hair when you're a young lady and want it again."

On Sunday afternoon Milly and Bertie Polperran came to the Hermitage to spend the time with their little friends there, as on Saturday they had not met.

Prissy taught a little class in the Sunday school; but Milly and Bertie were free, only that they had some little verses and part of a hymn to learn, and they had leave to say them to Esther to-day.

Esther had been rather exercised in her mind about the fashion in which Pickle and Puck spent their Sundays. They went to church in the morning with her, and kept her pretty much on tenter-hooks all the time, although they had never done anything very outrageous so far. But their eyes always seemed everywhere, and nothing escaped their observation; and they would giggle in a subdued yet sufficiently audible fashion, if anything amused them, and sometimes try to make Esther or their little friends opposite join them in their ill-timed hilarity.

After having been to church, they seemed to

consider that for them Sunday had ended, and they played about and amused themselves just as they pleased.

“Crump always played with us on Sunday afternoons,” they would say when Esther suggested something more quiet and decorous, according to her ideas. They did not seem to understand why they should be more quiet on Sunday than on any other day, and it was not quite easy for Esther to explain.

“They must have been badly brought up,” Prissy would say in her prim, grown-up fashion. “I think their father must be a very strange sort of man.” But when Esther spoke to Genefer, she was a little comforted by hearing her say,—

“You see, Miss Esther, the poor little boys have had no mother to teach them, and gentlemen don’t think of things quite like mothers. I don’t think they mean to be naughty a bit, but they’ve not been taught as you have. Perhaps they’ll get into better ways living here for a spell. But it’s no good preaching at them. That’ll never do it. You only get at children by making them love you. Then they like the things you like,

and they learn different ways. They're getting fond of you, Miss Esther, my dear. They'll begin to copy you by and by, whether they know it or not."

Esther did not think Pickle and Puck had much notion of copying anybody; but she thought they were growing fond of her in a fashion, and she was certainly growing fond of them. If they brought new anxiety into her life, they brought a considerable amount of pleasure and variety too. She did not at all regret the arrangement, although she wished the boys had been just a little younger, so that she might have had more influence over them.

"We're going to have a Sunday school, and you're to teach!" cried Milly, running up to Esther as she sat in the yew arbor, thinking that the four little ones would rather be alone together. "We've learned our lessons, and Pickle and Puck have learned something, too; and now we're going to come and be a class, and you're to teach us."

There was plenty of room in the summer-house for the class; and a chair was set for Esther,

whilst her four scholars occupied the fixed bench that ran round the arbor. They came in with looks of decorous gravity, and the boys pulled their forelocks, and Milly made a courtesy, whilst Esther felt half-embarrassed at so much respect and deference.

The little Polperrans repeated their lessons with the readiness of those accustomed to such tasks. Pickle followed with a fair show of fluency; and Puck said a short text with great deliberation, prompted from time to time by Milly, who had evidently "coached" him up in it.

At the close he looked up into Esther's face and asked with due solemnity, evidently put up to the right phraseology by either Bertie or Milly,—

"Please, teacher, what is the sin that so easily besets us?"

There was a faint giggle from Bertie; but Puck had thrown himself into his part, and was as solemn as a judge. Esther was a little embarrassed at the position in which she found herself, but she strove to find a suitable answer.

"I think it's different things with different people," she said after a pause. "You know

some people are naughty in some ways, and some in others. We don't all sin alike."

Pickle here broke in eagerly,—

"Let's think of the naughty things people do. Mr. Trelawny cut off your hair yesterday without asking leave. Wasn't that a sort of sin?"

Esther was rather taken aback at this method of treating the subject; but before she had found words in which to reply, the boy had broken out again,—

"I tell you what I think it is—the sin that so easily besets him is doing just as he likes, and being what Crump calls 'lord high everything.' Don't you think that's Uncle Bob's sin, Ess?"

Esther looked straight at Pickle, and answered with some spirit,—

"I know somebody else who always wants to do as he likes, and cares very little what other people say or think."

Pickle looked suddenly taken aback.

"My stars!" he exclaimed.

Bertie pointed one finger at Pickle and another at Puck. His square face was bubbling over with a subdued sense of humor.

“She means you,” said Puck; “I know she does. It’s just what you’re always saying. You do what you like, and don’t care what people say. If it’s a sin, it’s your sin too.”

“Oh dear!” cried Pickle, really interested now; “I never thought of that before. Did you mean that, Ess?”

Esther’s face was rosy red now; she spoke truthfully, however.

“I think I did, Pickle. You know you do like your own way. But I think we all like that. I suppose that’s one of the sins that easily besets us all.”

“I don’t think it besets you,” said Pickle loyally; “you’re always doing things you don’t like, to spare other people, or because they want you to.”

“It besets Prissy!” cried Milly eagerly; “she always wants her own way. She likes to be ‘lord high everything’ too. She’s been as cross as two sticks lately, because Bertie and I have kept secrets from her, and she can’t do just as she likes with us.”

But Esther did not think this a very profitable

turn to the talk, and she said slowly and rather shyly,—

“I don’t think we need bother about other people’s sins. It would be better to leave these alone, I think, and just to try and find out our own. If we know what they are, perhaps we can get over them; but if we don’t know them, we shall never fight against them properly.”

“There’s some sense in that!” cried Pickle eagerly. “There was a picture I once saw on a church window of a man fighting with a dragon. I asked the old verger what it meant, and he said it was what all of us had to do some time or other. I didn’t know what he meant, but Crump told me he meant that we all had to fight against sins, only they weren’t live green dragons with red eyes and crinkly wings now; and we didn’t always know when one was trying to get the best of us, but we’d got to try and be ready to fight. I suppose that’s the sort of thing you mean, Ess? We’ve got to find out what our sins are. Let’s have a think about it now. I don’t mind fighting, if I only know what to fight.”

“I’d like it to be a green dragon with red

eyes," said Puck; "there'd be some sense in that."

"Well, but if there aren't any dragons left, we have to do it the other way," cried Pickle eagerly. "Now, let's think about it. We'll all think. At least I don't think Esther needs. I don't think she's got any sins."

"O Pickle, don't say that!"

"Well, I don't think you have. You're always good. Look at the marks you get; and the Owl has never had to scold you once. I don't believe you could think of any sin that besets you."

"Yes, indeed I can," answered Esther—"ever so many. I've got one in my head this very minute."

"What's that? Do tell."

Esther's face grew red, but she answered bravely,—

"Yes, I'll tell you if you like, because, perhaps, if I tell, I shall be able to fight it better. I'm often so frightened about things nobody else is."

The children eyed her wonderingly.

“But I don’t call that a sin,” cried Pickle. “You can’t help being frightened—you’re a girl.”

“Yes, but I don’t think girls ought to be cowards,” answered Esther, her face still flushed. “I want to learn to be brave. I think being afraid when there isn’t any reason is a sort of sin.” She paused and hesitated, and then added in a lower voice, “I think we ought to remember that God can always take care of us, and then we need not be afraid any more.”

The children were silent for a few minutes. Something in Esther’s manner impressed them, they hardly knew why. They felt that she was speaking to them out of the depths of her heart, and that she meant every word she said.

“Do you ever think about God?” asked Pickle at last.

“Yes,” answered Esther in a low voice, “but not as often as I ought to. I shouldn’t be so frightened often, if I thought about Him more.”

“Why? What difference would it make?”

“Oh, don’t you see? Suppose you were frightened by something, and felt all alone, with nobody

to help you. And then suppose you remembered that your father was looking at you all the time through a window somewhere with a glass, and that he saw you though you didn't see him. And if you knew that he could send somebody to help you if you wanted it really, why, you wouldn't be afraid any more, would you?"

"No, I suppose not. It would be silly."

"I think, perhaps, it is silly; and what is silly can be a sin, I think," said Esther steadily. "I want not to be frightened so often, and I think that is the sin that most easily besets me. I am going to try and fight against it, because it makes me forget about God always seeing us and taking care of us, and that is wrong, I know."

"I wonder what my sin is!" cried Pickle. "I expect I've got a lot. Esther, do you think it's a sin to call people by nicknames? Old—I mean Uncle Robert makes a great fuss about it."

"I—I don't think it's perhaps the names exactly," said Esther, with a little hesitation—"at least not amongst ourselves. But to older people it doesn't seem quite respectful, and children ought to treat older people with respect. I think

it says so in the Bible somewhere. I'm sure it means it often. You know that even Jesus was obedient, and 'subject to' Joseph and Mary, though He was God's Son all the time."

"We don't mean any harm," said Puck. Crump used only to laugh, and call us cheeky little beggars."

"Well," said Esther, with a little gentle decision in her tone, "I don't think it sounds at all nice for little boys to speak of their father as Crump."

"Don't you, really? Do you mean you would call it a sin?"

"I don't know whether I am old enough to judge about that," answered Esther, "but it doesn't seem to me like honoring our fathers and mothers to speak of them like that, and that would be disobeying one of the commandments."

"Well, I never thought of it like that," said Pickle, in the tone of one open to conviction; "but I don't mind giving that up, if it is a sort of a sin. I did sometimes think that when people were there Cr—I mean father—didn't always quite like it. But I'm sure we must have lots of sins besides that. That's only quite a little one."

"I'm greedy; that's my sin," said Bertie. "I always want the biggest egg or the nicest cake. I don't always get them, but I want them. I shall have to fight against that."

"I don't like getting up in the morning," said Milly; "and I get cross with Prissy often; and I hate my sums, and scribble on my slate instead of doing them. I think I'm lazy, for I'm always so glad when we can't do lessons, or visitors come when I'm practising. And sometimes I don't practise all my time, but run out into the garden for a little while, if nobody is about, and pretend I've been at the piano all the time. I don't mean I say so, because nobody asks me; but I pretend it to myself, and I suppose that's a sort of lie."

"I sometimes tell stories," said Puck. "I say I've done things and seen them, and I haven't really—at least not just as I say them. I like to pretend things are bigger than they are, and that we're braver, and stronger, and cleverer."

"And I like to do just as I like," said Pickle, remembering how the conversation had begun. "I don't like Mr. Earle when he interferes, and makes us do things his way; and I get in a rage

sometimes because he sees through us and stops the things we want to do. I think I've got a lot of sins—more than any of the rest of you. I'm the eldest, and so I suppose I should have. At least Esther's older; but then she's good. I don't call it a sin to be afraid. Girls and women are made that way. It's much worse to be always wanting your own way, and not caring for anything or anybody so long as you get it."

Pickle had faced the flaw in his character or training with a good deal of candor, although, perhaps, there was a touch of pride in the feeling that he had a bigger sin to battle with than anybody else.

Esther's voice was now heard saying gently,—

"Then if we all know what is the sin that so easily besets us, we ought to be able to fight against it better, and to help one another to fight too. I think it would be nice to help each other when we can. There is something somewhere about bearing one another's burdens. I should think that would be the same sort of thing."

"And let's have a Sunday school rather often," said Milly, "and tell each other how we're getting

on. I should like to know if Esther stops being afraid of things ; and I'll tell how often I've been lazy at lessons, or have got angry with Prissy. Now and then I'm angry with mother too"—here Milly's face got very red—"and sometimes I say naughty things to her very softly, because I know she doesn't hear them. I think that's quite a sin—don't you, Esther?"

The sound of the tea-bell broke up the Sunday school at that moment, and the children trooped to the house, where Genefer had a nice tea waiting for them in the dining-room.

That night she remarked to her little charge how well-behaved they had all been that Sunday afternoon.

Esther's face grew rather rosy as she answered,—

"Yes, we are all going to try to be good, and fight our sins. But, Genefer, I wanted to tell them that we must ask Jesus to help us, and I didn't quite know how to say it, and so I didn't. I think it's very hard to be really brave."

"You'll get braver as you get older, Miss Esther," said the woman sympathetically, "and

the little folks will soon find out that they want help for their bits of battles, and you can talk about how that's to be had another time."

"I—yes, I will try," said Esther earnestly. "I hope I shall grow braver, and then it will be less hard."

CHAPTER VII.

DAYS OF SUNSHINE.

SOMEHOW after that Saturday at the Crag, and the Sunday following, on which some good resolutions had been made, Esther found that her life became decidedly brighter and happier.

Mr. Earle was particularly kind to her in study hours. He put aside for a time the lessons on arithmetic, which had often haunted her at night, for sums were rather a trouble to the little girl; and, instead, he brought from the Crag some beautiful books on natural history, and gave her chapters to read about the structure and habits of wild animals, which was very interesting; and then, when the boys had done their tasks, he would tell them all delightful tales about these animals, some of which he had shot himself in different parts of the world.

Mr. Earle was a capital hand at telling a story.

They soon found that out ; and the boys began to understand that he was a tutor quite worth pleasing. On the days when they had been industrious and well-behaved, he never minded stopping for half an hour or more before time, to help them with some bit of work of their own, or to tell them exciting stories.

But if they had been idle, or impertinent, or unruly, he just packed them off to their own pursuits with a few cutting words ; and if he stayed at all, it was to tell Esther something about the pictures in her book, and the boys were not permitted to remain or to hear a word.

“ You’re not fit for civilized society—be off with you ! ” Mr. Earle would say in his quick, authoritative way ; and it was no use their putting on coaxing or defiant airs, as they had done to their father in old days. Mr. Earle would neither be coaxed nor defied. He sent them straight off with an air of cutting contempt, which Pickle, at least, was old enough to feel and to wince under.

“ If you can’t behave yourselves like gentlemen, you’re not fit company for a lady,” was an-

other of his maxims ; and both Pickle and Puck began rather to dread provoking these speeches from their inflexible tutor.

And then Mr. Earle was well worth pleasing, as they soon began to find. Upon the Wednesday following that eventful Saturday, when he came down in the afternoon (for he always went back to the Crag between half-past twelve and two), he walked into the study and swept all the books back into their places, and said, with a happy twinkle in his eye,—

“ Get your hats, and come along. We’re going to have a lesson in navigation this afternoon.”

The boys gave a whoop of delight. They did not exactly know what navigation might be, but they scented something delightful ; and as they had been remarkably good for the past days, it seemed to come like a reward of virtue. Esther’s face brightened with pleasure and curiosity. She wondered what was going to happen ; but there was no delay in getting off, and soon they were all walking down to the shore, where they found old Pollard waiting for them, not in his cranky

old tub, but in the tight, trim boat belonging to the Crag, that was kept in order by the old fisherman, and had beautiful white sails curled up in readiness, two masts, and a figurehead like a swan with a gracefully-arched neck.

Esther knew the look of the boat, and had once been out in it with Mr. Trelawny, but had been too much afraid of him to enjoy her sail at all. Now, however, her eyes kindled and danced, for she dearly loved the water, and was never the least seasick; and when the boys understood that they were going out for a sail, they yelled and danced and shouted like a pair of wild Indians.

The old fisherman sat with the helm in his hand, but Mr. Earle managed the sails, and he went about his business as though he were a sailor himself, and talked in queer terms with the old man, whilst the boys listened agape, and wished they knew what it meant.

They soon found, however, that they had not come out simply to be idle. They were soon in the middle of a lecture upon ropes and rigging, sails and spars, and began to understand that this sailing was not a mere game, but that there was

a vast deal to learn about it, and that a whole new world of thoughts and ideas was opening before them.

But it was very interesting, for Puck always meant to be a sailor, and he was eager to learn as many new words as his little head could take in. It was interesting too because the things Mr. Earle told them explained many mysteries which they had come across in story-books, and had never understood. The boys did not lack for wits, and were clever with their fingers too, so it was not a difficult task to get them into the way of furling or unfurling a sail, or learning to distinguish between the different ropes and spars.

When they passed by other boats, Mr. Earle pointed out different parts of them, and expected them to remember the names; and, on the whole, he was satisfied with the sharpness of his pupils, and he found them tolerably well-behaved too.

“If you boys are thinking of the army and the navy for professions,” he remarked once to them, with his rather grim yet not unkindly smile, “the sooner you get all this fooling out of your heads the better.”

“What fooling?” asked Pickle, with a little flush in his cheek, for the word did not quite please him.

“I mean the foolish trick of treating all the world as though there was perfect equality there—as though a little shaver like you had the same rights of speech and remark as grown-up people who have served their apprenticeship, and gone through their training—as though your opinions were of the least consequence to anybody, and you had any right to air them when they are not wanted, and to have any say in the way in which your affairs are regulated. I mean all that, and a good deal more. If you don’t get the better of that stuff these next few years, you’ll find yourself in some trouble when you’re under discipline.”

Pickle flushed slowly. He had a fairly good understanding of the admonition addressed to them; but Puck felt it rather beyond him.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“Well, I’ll explain. A soldier and a sailor have nothing in the world to do at first but just to obey orders. There is no answering back, no

questioning commands, no loitering, or any nonsense like that. In old-fashioned days boys were trained like that at home—at least the majority were ; a father or a mother gave the word, and there was an end of it. Then, when those boys went out into life they had learned unquestioning obedience, and it had become second nature to them. Nowadays things are vastly changed—whether for the better or the worse time will show, but I have my own opinions on the point.”

Pickle and Puck exchanged glances, and the elder boy said slowly,—

“Cr—I mean father—sometimes told us we should have to have the nonsense licked out of us some day. But we did generally obey him. Of course we didn’t obey Miss Masters. I don’t see how anybody could expect it. She was just an old frump, and her rules were all bosh. I don’t think father thought much of her himself.”

“You may not think very much of your superior officer some day,” said Mr. Earle grimly, “but you’ll have to obey him, or he’ll know the reason why.”

“ Ah ! but a man is different.”

“ Yes, a much harder nut to crack, as you will find to your cost. If you had a spark of chivalry in your composition, you would know better than to speak slightingly of women. No really brave or noble-minded man ever does that.”

Mr. Earle did not spare his pupils ; yet in spite of his sharp speeches Pickle and Puck liked him better and better every day, and began to take good care not to get into his black-books. They found that that did not pay at all.

Navigation lessons were not all play, as the boys soon found ; and there was some pretty hard work in the way of sums bound up with it, as well as a great deal to notice and remember. But it was the sort of thing that they liked. And later on they were allowed to make rough models of ships themselves, and try to get the ropes and spars right ; and this was like a new game, and kept them busy and happy for hours together. And then they were taken up to the Crag to see certain models of ships there ; and Mr. Trelawny put them through their paces, and seemed really quite pleased with them, and made

them a present of a small model yacht, which became the most prized of their possessions.

Esther did not learn the navigation so thoroughly as the boys, though she began to feel quite knowing on the subject of spars and rigging and nautical terms. She used to sit beside the old fisherman at the helm when the boat went out, and look at the clouds and the sea, and dream her own dreams or get the old man to tell her some of his stories, which he was always ready to do.

Her head hardly ever ached now; and Mr. Earle always seemed to know when it did, and gave her the sort of lessons that did not make it any worse. The boys were very nice too—much more companionable than they had been at first; and she was always ready to cut out and hem the sails for them, and help them with her clever little fingers when they got into difficulties over their rigging. And they soon found that her sharp eyes saw things quite as soon as theirs, and that she could often help them out of a difficulty; so instead of treating her with a sort of boyish contempt, they came to look upon her as a valuable assistant, and included her in their games.

Then about this time another great pleasure and interest came into Esther's life.

It was about a fortnight after the visit to the Crag, when her mother called her one day, and said, with a smiling face,—

“Esther dear, do you think you remember how to drive?”

Esther's face colored with surprise and pleasure. When she was quite a little girl her father had taught her both to ride and drive, for they kept a little pony carriage for the mother, and she used to be allowed sometimes to drive the pony, though generally only when her father sat beside her. It seemed a long time now since she had done anything of the kind, but she fancied the power would soon come back, and answered eagerly,—

“O mama dear, I think I remember. Why do you ask?”

“Because I have been talking things over with Mr. Trelawny, and he has found me a nice quiet little pony, and a little light carriage, and Mr. Earle is going to drive it down this evening, and give you a lesson in driving, for the pony has

been used to children, and is said to be quite safe ; but I should like you to have a few more lessons before you take me out."

Esther clasped her hands in ecstasy.

"O mama ! are you going to have a little carriage again ? "

"Yes, dear—at least it is to be like this ; it will be my carriage, but it will be kept up at the Crag, where they have plenty of room, and a good coachman to look after things. And Mr. Earle is putting up a telephone from this house to the stables there, so that we can send for it when we want. And perhaps, by and by, if we like, we shall have it here ; but I am always afraid of things going wrong with live creatures."

Esther's eyes were bright. She would have better liked, for some things, that the pony should live in their own little stable, where she could visit it with apples and sugar ; and the thought of the telephone to the Crag was a little alarming to her—she hardly knew why. But she was making a great effort to conquer her groundless fears, and had met Mr. Trelawny lately several times, almost without a tremor. And certainly

the pony would have added to her cares, for her mother would not have been able to tell her anything about it, and if the man had neglected it in any way it would have been so difficult to find out.

“I see, mama,” she said slowly. “Perhaps that is best. How nice it will be for you to get drives again!”

“Yes, we shall both enjoy that. Mr. Trelawny wants you to get out into the fresh air as much as possible. We shall both get rosy cheeks, I hope, when we have our daily drives.”

The boys were greatly excited by the news that a pony was coming, and the three children stood together at the gate to watch the road leading downwards from the Crag to their house.

“Here it comes! here it comes!” cried Puck, capering with excitement; “here is Mr. Earle driving along. Oh, what a jolly little pony! He’s got a mane like yours before it was cut off, Essie—all in a touse. And look how he tosses his head! I’m sure he’s a jolly little beggar. I wonder if we may ride him sometimes. We used to ride at home. There was a pony there to

mow the lawns, and we had him in turns in the field often."

Mr. Trelawny appeared at this moment from the direction of the pine wood.

"Well," he said, on seeing the children, "and what are you all in such a state of jubilation about?"

"Oh, the pony, the pony!" shouted Puck; "isn't he a jolly little fellow! Where did he come from, Uncle Bob? and why didn't you drive down with him too?"

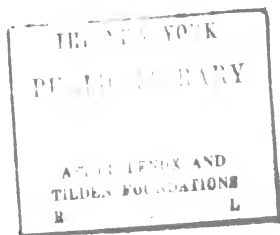
"My legs are too long for that little affair," laughed Mr. Trelawny. "It is only meant for fairies and ladies," and he laid his hand on Esther's head, so that she looked up quickly with a blush and a smile. Mrs. St. Aiden appeared from the house, and Mr. Trelawny offered her his arm and led her down towards the gate. Mr. Earle had drawn up the little equipage now, and the children were crowding round the pony, patting and praising him—a state of affairs to which he seemed quite accustomed, and which appeared to suit him very well.

"He is a darling!" cried Esther delightedly.



““He is a darling!” cried Esther delightedly.”—Page 168.

Esther's Charge.



“What is his name?” asked Puck.

“He was called Punch at his last home,” answered Mr. Earle, “and he is used to little people.—Now, little Miss Esther, are you going to be bold, and see how well you can drive him? I have come to see what sort of a whip you make.”

Esther’s face was in a glow. It was such a pretty little carriage, and everything about the pony was charming—his flowing mane and tail, the bright, silver-mounted harness, the red-leather frontlet and saddle pad, and the bright brown of the reins where she would hold them. It was all so spick and span and well turned out—much better than anything she had known in past days.

“I can drive,” began Pickle with sudden eagerness, and then he clapped his hand to his mouth and turned away.

“I’ll run and get a bit of sugar for Punch,” he cried; and he dashed off, pulling Puck after him.

“Look here,” he said, when they were a little way off; “I was just going to ask to have the first drive myself; but it’s Esther’s pony, and she must go. Don’t you go and say anything; and if she offers, don’t you take it. She’s always

doing things for us. We won't go and be pigs now she's got something nice herself."

"All right," answered Puck, whose mouth was watering for a ride on the pony, or a drive behind him; "she shall go first. But I suppose when she comes back we might have a turn?"

"Well, we will if they offer it us; but don't let's ask. We mustn't be greedy, you know; and we mustn't pretend we've ever done such a mighty lot of driving and riding, because you know we haven't—only just a little now and then. Crump was always saying we must have ponies and learn properly; but we never did."

Puck colored up a little, for he had been rehearsing in his head some of the things he meant to tell Esther about his prowess in the saddle and as a whip. But he remembered that he had resolved not to romance so much, just as Pickle was keeping in mind that he must not always expect to be the leader, and have the best place in everything. So they ran away to the house together to get the sugar; and Esther, after looking round a little uncertainly, let herself be handed into the carriage by Mr. Earle.

“I thought perhaps the boys would like the first turn,” she said.

“Ladies first is the right motto,” said Mr. Trelawny. “Now let us see how you hold your reins and whip. You won’t want much whip for this fellow, so you can leave that in its socket for the present.—Now, Earle, in with you, and let us see how the little lady can drive you.—You are not afraid, my dear?”

Esther looked up with candid eyes.

“No—at least, hardly at all. I’m not afraid, now Mr. Earle is here to help me. I like it very much, but I haven’t driven for a very long time. I might do something wrong if there was nobody here to help me.”

Then she drew up her reins and chirruped to Punch, who threw up his head and started at a brisk trot; and Esther felt her heart beating with excitement and delight, just dashed with a nervous tremor, for Punch went very fast, and there were several corners to turn in the winding road.

But the pony was a well-trained little fellow, and knew his business, and there was nothing in his way. He dashed along in fine style, Mr.

Earle encouraging both him and his driver ; and then Esther had the delight of drawing up at the rectory gate to show her new accomplishment to the little Polperrans, who came flocking out to admire and exclaim.

It was a very enchanting half-hour that Esther spent taking her first lesson ; but she was in rather a hurry to get back, for she wanted the boys to enjoy the new pleasure also.

So Mr. Earle took them each a turn, looking rather sharp after them ; but they had a very fair notion of driving, and were perfectly fearless, yet at the same time they were fond of animals, and had no desire to use the whip unreasonably, or otherwise to harass the pony.

Punch gave the greatest satisfaction to all, and was declared to be a “ perfect darling ” by Esther, and “ a jolly little brick ” by the boys.

“ Mr. Earle will take you out every day for a week, Esther,” said her mother, when the carriage had gone, “ and after that he thinks you will be able to drive me out.”

Esther's face glowed with pleasure, and Pickle cried out,—

“ We can drive you too, Aunt Saint ! ”

But to his surprise his aunt shook her head, smiling the while, and said,—

“ I think, dear, I should feel safer with Esther, thank you.”

“ Well, that’s funny,” said Puck ; “ I thought women always felt so much safer when they had a man driving them.”

Then Mrs. St. Aiden laughed and kissed him, and said he should drive her out some day, when he was a man.

Nice things seemed to happen often now. For after the pony and carriage had been a few weeks in use, and Esther had grown to be quite an experienced little whip, the children heard that Mr. Trelawny was going to keep his birthday, and that it was to be celebrated by an excursion to an old ruin, and that little people as well as their parents were to be allowed to go.

Esther clasped her hands in ecstasy when she heard this. She had never seen a ruin yet, though she had so often heard of them ; and as her knowledge of history had greatly enlarged during the past few months, she was quite de-

lighted to think of seeing any place which had played a part in the strange doings of olden times.

Mr. Trelawny's house had done that; but Esther could never quite conquer her fears of that place. She did not go very often even now, though the boys scrambled up the steep path as often as they dared, when she was out driving.

But a real old castle would be delightful; and Mr. Earle gave them a whole history of the things that had happened there, and showed them pictures of the kind of old windows and arches they would see, and taught Esther the names of the different moldings, so that she might know them when she saw them.

She was to drive herself in the pony carriage, and have one companion, either grown-up or not as she liked, and Puck had leave to go in the tiny back seat, which had been added in order that the three children might go out together.

"Of course you'll take me," cried Pickle, dancing round Esther in his excited fashion.

She hesitated a little, and then said,—

"Pickle dear, I should like you best; but I

feel as though I ought to ask Prissy Polperran. I'm afraid she sometimes thinks I am unkind to her. We used to be a good deal together, but I haven't time now that I have so many more things to do."

"Oh, bother that young poll-parrot!" cried Pickle; "I don't see why you should be bothered by her. She's a regular kill-joy. You know she is."

"It would be kind," said Esther gently; "she would like it very much. But you may drive her, Pickle, if mama and Mr. Earle don't mind."

"Not I, thank you!" answered Pickle scornfully. "I can't abide the stuck-up minx. She's a little prig. She's——"

Pickle suddenly stopped short. The Sunday class in the arbor still went on, and the children discussed with interest each week how they were "getting on with their sins," and how many dragons they had killed. They also had a little book now, and Esther wrote down in it what good resolutions they made week by week. It was rather like a "Sunday game" to the little people; nevertheless it was not without its effect

upon them. Pickle's sudden stop was due to the remembrance that they had last Sunday resolved to try and be kind to other people, and always do as they would be done by ; so that saying all these things about Prissy was not quite according to their rule.

“ Oh, bother ! ” he said, and looked at Esther, and then began to laugh. In a minute he spoke again,—

“ All right, Ess. Take Pretty Polly. I suppose she will like it, and they don't have half the fun we do. I'll try to be civil to her all day too, if I can ; but she is such a precious——”

Another stop and another laugh.

“ I say, Essie, I think we make too many resolutions. I'm always tripping over some of them. Don't let's have any new ones till we've learned how to keep these.”

“ I'll let Bertie have the dicky behind,” said Puck suddenly—“ he'd like it ; and I don't care so very much, if Pretty Polly is going instead of Pickle.”

“ Thank you, boys,” said Esther ; “ it is very nice of you. I should like to have you best, but I think we ought to try and be kind.”

The young folks did not enjoy themselves any the less for the small sacrifice they had made. The delight of the Polperrans at being driven in Esther's little carriage made amends to her for the loss of the boys; and Prissy was quite nice and merry, and never once put on her grown-up airs of superiority.

Pickle and Puck occupied the box seat of a big wagonette, and were permitted by the driver to hold the reins now and then up the hill, or along the level, so they had nothing left to wish for; and it was a very merry and happy party that arrived by midday at the old ruined castle perched commandingly on the summit of a crag, not so very unlike the one where Mr. Trelawny lived.

Prissy had been there once before, and showed Esther a great many of the wonders it contained—the great banqueting hall, with a part of its beautiful vaulted roof still standing; the old chapel, where the tracery of the windows was wonderful in its graceful beauty; and the ancient keep, with the thick walls, in which little passages could run without interfering with them.

Mr. Trelawny was a capital host, and knew how

to make people enjoy themselves. There was plenty to eat, and plenty to do ; but he seemed fondest of getting all the little people about him, and telling them the wonderful stories of battles and sieges and escapes which had taken place around these very walls.

“Show us the prisons !” cried Pickle. “Aren’t there some dungeons underneath ? And isn’t there a block or an ax or something like that ? I like those jolly old underground places. I’d soon have got out though, if I’d been a prisoner.”

“I’ll show you one prison, anyhow,” answered Mr. Trelawny ; “but I think you’d be puzzled how to get out of it, if once you were shut in.”

Esther felt her breath coming and going. She did so hope there were no underground places here. The old feeling of horror came back directly she heard this talk. She felt as though everything had suddenly been spoiled.

She didn’t want to think about poor wretched prisoners, shut out from the light of day, lying in chains down in those terrible places. She couldn’t think how all the children seemed to want to go and look. It made her feel sick and

miserable; and yet she did not like to hang back when everybody else was moving.

She thought of her resolution not to be frightened of fancied terrors; but this was not fancy. These were real prisons, and real people had been shut up there; and perhaps she would hear of horrid things that were done to them, which would make her feel all creepy at night, and not let her go to sleep.

Her feet lagged more and more as the party trooped on after Mr. Trelawny, laughing and asking questions; and then Esther suddenly found that she could not make up her mind to go with the rest. She turned tail, and ran in the opposite direction, and threw herself down on the warm grass, shaking all over.

“What is the matter?” asked a voice close beside her. She gave a great jump, and looked round with scared eyes. There was Mr. Earle sitting very near indeed to her, with a sketch-book in his hand. She wished then she had not come, or had seen him in time to run somewhere else.

“What is the matter?” he asked again quite kindly.

“I—I don’t know. They were going down to the dungeons. I didn’t want to go—that’s all.”

“There is nothing very pretty down there; come and look at my drawing, and tell me how you like it. Isn’t that a fine bit of molding there? Do you know people come from all over the country to see it. It’s one of the best bits that exist in the world—or at least in this country.”

“How nicely you draw!” said Esther admiringly, feeling the cold tremors abating. “What a lot of things you can do, Mr. Earle! It must be nice to be clever.”

“Very, I should think,” he answered with a smile. “Would you like to learn to sketch some day?”

“Oh, very much, only there are so many things to learn. There does not seem time for them all.”

“No, that’s the worst of it; it is like picking up pebbles on the seashore. One can never get more than a few out of all the millions there. Still, if we make these few our own we have done something.”

Mr. Earle went on with his drawing, and Esther sat watching him, feeling soothed and com-

forted, she did not know why. Her thoughts went off on their own wonderings, and presently she said suddenly,—

“Mr. Earle, is it wrong to be afraid of things—I mean of things that don’t hurt, like dark places and cellars?”

“It is not wrong, but it is often inconvenient.”

“You don’t mind them, I suppose?”

“Not now. I used to be afraid of the dark once when I was a little boy.”

“How did you cure yourself?”

“My mother asked me to try and get over it. So she taught me to say my prayers first, and then walk over the dark part of the house every night alone. I used to make believe that an angel came with me. After that I soon stopped being afraid.”

Esther sat very still for a little while, a light coming slowly into her face.

“Do you think the angel was there really, Mr. Earle?”

“I should not be very much surprised,” he answered gravely, and they sat in silence till the rest came back.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CITY OF REFUGE.

It must not be supposed that the city of refuge was forgotten or neglected all this time.

Saturday afternoons had always been kept sacred to it, except when some other attraction took the children elsewhere. The changes which had taken place on the other days did not affect Saturday to any great extent.

Mr. Earle was always up at the Crag on that afternoon, shut up in the laboratory with Mr. Trelawny. He did not volunteer either drives or sails on that day, and other people were busy too. Esther always had a number of little Saturday duties to think of; Prissy was safely shut up in the lending library; and the four younger children invariably spent the leisure time together, and almost as regularly got the old fisherman's boat and took a trip across to their island.

But they had kept this a profound secret, and, so far, there had been no danger of its escaping them. Mr. Polperran had not been told about the island, but Bertie had had leave to whisper to him that they had a very nice place they went to down by the sea, and he had said it was all right, and he was glad they should play there. For Mr. Polperran was a Cornishman born and bred, and he did not wish his children to grow up timid or dependent. He would have brought them up more robustly had it not been for the fears and prejudices of his wife, who had lived almost all her previous life in London. As it was, he was quite pleased for his little son to have boy companions to teach him bolder sorts of games than he had ever learned at home, and he told Mrs. Polperran not to mind if Milly and Bertie did come back wet and dirty. They were getting good from the salt water and from their companions, and the rest mattered nothing.

So the secret of the island never transpired in that house, and Esther always thought that Pickle and Puck spent their Saturday afternoons in the rectory orchard.

Orders had been issued to the fishermen generally, and Pollard in particular, that the children were not to be permitted to go out alone in a boat ; and had they attempted to embark down at the little quay in the village, they would have been quickly stopped. But Pickle had had the wits to foresee that from the first, and had made his bargain with the queer, old, half-daft man who lived at the creek, and who was very glad to let the little gentleman have the use of his boat for a few hours on Saturday, for the payment of the shilling which Pickle always gave him.

Pocket-money was plentiful with the two boys, who had come with an ample store, and who received their usual amount weekly from their aunt. There was not much chance of spending it in such a quiet place. Fishing-tackle and sweet stuff from the one village shop absorbed a little, but there was always a shilling for "Jonah," as they called him, whenever they wanted the boat, and the old fellow was cunning enough not to say a word about it, so that nobody in the place knew that the children made a practise of being out on the water alone.

To be sure, there was not a great deal of risk in this. The boat was very safe and heavy ; their island was not far away, and was well within shelter of the bay. They were not strong enough to care to row farther out to sea, and the weather through the summer had been exceptionally fine and calm.

“I wish we could get a nice breezy day,” Pickle had often said ; “then we’d hoist up the sail and have a jolly time. But it never blows on Saturday afternoon. I call it a swindle.”

There was a sail to the boat, and the boys were learning more and more of the management of a sailing craft. They often went out with Mr. Earle in the *Swan*, and sometimes he would take the tiller and make them manage the sail, whilst sometimes he would take the sail and set them on to steer. They were growing expert now, and they had never been lacking in boldness from the first. One day Mr. Trelawny came down himself, and Puck was put in charge of the tiller and Pickle of the sheet ; and between them, with only a little assistance and instruction, they managed to get the boat through the water very creditably.

“ You’ll make a pair of good jack-tars in time,” had been Mr. Trelawny’s encouraging verdict at the end of the voyage ; and ever since Pickle and Puck had been burning and yearning for a chance of displaying their prowess by taking a sail quite on their own account.

They had begged to have the *Swan* for their experiment, but had been forbidden.

“ Don’t try to run before you can walk,” Mr. Earle had advised. “ This is a ticklish coast, and you don’t know much about it yet. And though the weather has been very settled, nobody knows what may happen. Sometimes a gale of wind gets up just when one expects it least. You’d be in a nice predicament if that were to happen. You must wait till you’re older and stronger before you go sailing alone.”

“ I call that rot,” Pickle said rather loftily in private to his brother afterwards ; “ we could do it perfectly well now, I’m sure.”

But as Pickle was really trying to cure himself of his self-will and desire to do everything his own way, he did not say anything more about having the *Swan* to go sailing in. Perhaps he

felt that Mr. Earle's "no" was a different sort of thing from his father's, and that coaxing and teasing would be thrown away here. So the two things together kept him quiet.

Nevertheless there was a great desire in his mind to show off his prowess and skill in the art of practical navigation, and it had been quite a disappointment to him that Saturday after Saturday came and went, and there was not enough breeze in the bay to fill the sail of "Jonah's" old boat.

"It seems as if it was just to spite us," he grumbled more than once; "but it'll have to come some day, and then you'll see what you'll see."

It did not seem much like coming this breathless September afternoon. The sun shone as fiercely as if it were the height of summer. There was neither a cloud to be seen in the sky nor a breath of air to be felt.

"It'll be precious hot pulling across," said Puck rather ruefully, "but I suppose we'd better go."

"Oh yes; and then we can have a jolly bathe, and paddle about all the time in the pools. Be-

sides, Milly and Bertie can pull a bit now ; we can take turns with those old sweeps."

Bertie and Milly were always all eagerness to go across. To them the island was a veritable city of refuge. Prissy could never find them there, and that was in itself a wonderful boon on holiday afternoons. True, Prissy was generally all the time in the parish room ; but there had been occasions when she had turned up unexpectedly, and had interrupted and condemned the most charming games. There was none of the delicious security from interruption at home that was one of the greatest charms of the island. And the very fact of going thither by themselves in a boat was an immense attraction to the rectory children, who were hardly ever taken out upon the water, even when Mr. Trelawny did offer them a sail in the *Swan*.

Mrs. Polperran could not conquer her nervous fears for them when out in a boat. She hated the water herself, and feared it for the little ones. She had an idea that Mr. Trelawny was a very headstrong, rash sort of man, and she almost always found some excuse for declining his in-

vitations to her children. If they had known this themselves they would have been much distressed ; but happily they were in ignorance, and supposed that Mr. Trelawny only cared about Pickle and Puck, who regarded him in the light of a new relation.

However, the bliss of these excursions to the island had made a wonderful difference in their lives. There was always something to look forward to all the week. And they had now the delightful sense of having a place all their own—a real city of refuge, where even Prissy could never find them ; and they were gradually collecting there a miscellaneous assortment of treasures, keeping in view the possibility that they might some day really have to flee to their island home for safety from some peril, and desirous to have some useful stores laid up there in readiness.

Most Saturdays they made some additions to their supplies. They had an old tin box which Pickle had begged from Genefer, and this was hidden in a cleft of the rocks in the little creek which formed their most sheltered hiding-place. The stores were all hidden away in this box, and

kept very well. They tasted the biscuits and the chocolate-sticks each time, to make sure they were keeping all right, and Milly declared that they grew "more and more delicious" with the flight of time.

The heat was very great to-day upon the water, but when they reached the island they could find all sorts of nice places to shelter themselves in. Shoes and stockings were off in a moment, and Milly's skirts were soon tucked right away, so that she could paddle with the best of them.

"Oh, I do wish we could live here always, and not have to go home at all!" she cried. "I'd like to sail away to the other side of the world, and live on a coral island, and eat bread-fruit, and have a delicious time. I wonder how long it would take to get there. I wonder why nobody does nice interesting things except in books. Why doesn't Mr. Trelawny go and see nice places like that when he has a boat of his own, instead of always living up there in a house and staring at things with an electric eye?"

"I don't believe he's got an electric eye," said Puck. "His eyes are just like everybody else's!"

“I heard father say he had,” said Bertie quickly ; “so he must have it, I’m sure.”

“Well, I don’t much believe he has,” reiterated Puck. “I asked Essie if he had only the other day, and she didn’t know ; and Aunt Saint said she thought it was all nonsense.”

“Perhaps it’s Mr. Earle then,” said Milly ; “but somebody’s got one up there, I know. I think father said they couldn’t do all their experiments unless one of them had an electric eye.”

“Mr. Earle’s eyes are just like other people’s when he takes off his spectacles,” returned Puck.

“I’ll tell you what that is,” said Pickle, who came up at the moment ; “I was telling Essie about it only last night. I think she was rather frightened. I’ve been asking lots of things about electricity, and it’s awfully queer sort of stuff—all in volts and things. And you can switch it on and off as you like. I suppose that’s what they do with their eyes—sometimes they’re like other people’s eyes, and sometimes they’re electric. And you have to have a complete circuit, you know. I think that’s what Mr. Earle uses his spectacles for. I think it completes the circuit.”

"Yes, because they're round," added Puck ; and the three younger ones regarded Pickle with looks of respect, as one who has been dabbling deep in the fount of knowledge.

Suddenly in the midst of their play Pickle broke into a shout of triumph.

"Look, look, look !" he cried, and pointed out to sea.

"What is it ?" asked the others, staring, but seeing nothing, till Bertie suddenly realized his meaning, and clapped his hands in triumph.

"A breeze ! a breeze !" he shouted. "Now we can go sailing ! It's coming up beautifully !"

Milly began to caper wildly. She had been longing unspeakably to participate in the delights of which she had heard. She thought that sailing on the water must be just the most delightful thing in the whole world, and had shed a few tears in private because she had never been in the *Swan*, and Bertie only once.

"Oh, come along, come along !" she cried ecstatically. "Can we really have a sail ?"

Her confidence in Pickle was by this time unbounded. He seemed to her almost as wise and

as resourceful as a grown-up person, without all the tiresome prudence that seemed to come with the advance of years. If he took them they would be as safe as if they were with Mr. Trelawny himself, and Pickle's own confidence in his powers was little less.

Good resolutions were cast to the winds. Perhaps Pickle did not even know that this was the case. He had so longed for a breeze which would enable him to sail the fisherman's big boat, and it never occurred to him to regard this desire as a part and parcel of the self-will he had tried to get the better of.

He had given up teasing for leave to go out in the *Swan* alone. But that was quite different. She was a fast-sailing boat, and perhaps wanted somebody more skilled to manage her properly ; but this old tub was as safe as a house, he was perfectly certain of that. Besides, they need not go any distance, but just sail round and round or backwards and forwards in the bay. He knew quite well by this time how to tack and put the boat's head about. He could manage that old tub as well as "Jonah" himself.

"Shall we go and find a coral island?" asked Milly, as they tumbled one over the other in their haste.

"I—I don't quite know," answered Pickle, not wishful to seem backward in the spirit of adventure, but rather doubtful as to the course to take for such a goal. "Perhaps to-day we'd better not go so very far. We can look for a coral island next time."

"Shall we take some provisions with us, in case we're wrecked?" asked Milly with beaming face, as though that would be the crowning delight to the adventure.

"We might perhaps," said Pickle; "one gets jolly hungry out sailing. We often have something to eat when we're out in the *Swan*."

Milly ran off to the storehouse for supplies, whilst the boys made a rush for the boat. Little puffs of wind were coming up from the west, dimpling the water, which had been as smooth as oil, and making it all ruffled and pretty.

The sun, too, began to be obscured by a light film of cloud, and away over the land great banks of lurid-looking vapor began piling themselves

slowly up in the sky ; but the children were much too busy to think of looking out for signs like these, nor would they have been much the wiser had they noticed them.

Some Cornish children, no older than Milly and Bertie, might have guessed from the look of sky and sea, and from the strange, heavy feeling in the air, that there was going to be a storm. But Mrs. Polperran had managed to bring up her young family in wonderful ignorance of such matters. Bertie had never been allowed to run down to the shore to play with or amongst the fishermen's children ; and so long as the sun was shining they never thought of such a thing as rain.

There was sunshine still over the sea, though it was not so bright and hot as it had been.

“Isn't it nice?” cried Milly, who was in a perfect ecstasy. “It isn't too hot now, and there's a lovely little breeze coming up, and it's all so pretty and nice. Here's our basket ; there are some cakes left, and I've put in some biscuits. Let's take a drink of water out of the fountain, and then we can go for ever so long.”

The children kept their "fountain" replenished in dry weather from a can they brought over, filled from the well behind the fisherman's cottage. They liked drinking from the cleft in the rocks, but unless there had been rain quite lately the cleft was apt to be dry. However, they satisfied their thirst before embarking, and Milly held her breath as she watched the old sail slowly swelling itself out as the puffs of wind caught it. It was the most entrancing experience to see the island just gliding away from them, as it seemed, for the boat did not appear to be moving, and yet there was quite a gap between them and it.

Then the sheet began to draw. Pickle gave a shout of triumph as they felt the movement, and saw the little ripple of water round the prow.

"She's off! she's off!" shouted both the boys in triumph. "Set her head out to sea, Bertie. That's right. Hold her so. Now we shall go. The wind's fresher away from shore. Oh jolly, jolly, jolly! Don't we go along?"

Milly had no words just at first. It was too delightful and wonderful. Here they were actually in a boat of their very own, heading out for

the beautiful green and golden sea lying away ahead of them, sparkling and dimpling in the westerling light. They did not so much as glance towards land, where the masses of black sulphurous-looking clouds were piling themselves above the tall crags. They only saw the beautiful, shining sea, and felt the bird-like motion of the boat as she rushed through the dimpling waves.

This was something like sailing. No laborious pulling at those heavy oars that moved so slowly through the water, and often hardly seemed to make the boat move at all; nothing to do but sit still, just holding sheet and rudder, and watch the water curling away from the bow as the boat pursued her course. When the puffs of wind came up more strongly they seemed almost to fly, and when they died down a little the sail would flap for a few minutes against the mast, and then Puck would alter their course a little, and soon it would be drawing again beautifully.

They did not care where they went or what they did. They were having a glorious sail, and they were full of delight and triumph. Nobody could say now that they could not manage a boat.

“Only if we tell,” said Milly, frankly expressing the thought in words, “perhaps they’ll never let us go again.”

“That is so stupid of people,” said Pickle; “they are always like that. If they’d know we went over to our city of refuge alone in a boat, I believe they’d have stopped us; but we never came to any harm, and now that we can sail like bricks, and manage a boat quite easily, they’d go on, saying just the same things as when we’d never been out or had any lessons. So it’s no good talking; we’d better keep it our secret, like the island. But now that the windy time of year is coming, we can go out sailing often. We’ll have jolly fun, if some stupid old fisherman doesn’t see us and tell; but there seems nobody about to-day anyway.”

“I expect it was too hot and bright for fishing,” said Milly. “I know fishermen like dull days or the nights best.”

A low rumble from the shore boomed through the air, and the children looked round.

“I think it’s a thunderstorm over there,” said Puck, “but it’s jolly and fine out here.”

“There ! I saw a flash of lightning come out of the big black cloud !” cried Milly. “It was so pretty. I don’t mind lightning when I’m right away from it out here. I don’t much like it at home. Let’s sail away from it, Pickle, right away. It’s quite fine the way we’re going, and we go so fast. We shan’t have it at all. And when mother wonders why we’re not wet or anything, we shall just say it didn’t rain where we were. It’s like the Israelites and the land of Goshen.”

Pickle looked just a little doubtfully at the weather. The sun was almost obscured now, though it still shone over the sea away to the west and south. The wind was coming up in squally gusts behind them, and sending the boat dancing along merrily. It was certainly great fun sailing on like that, but the waves were beginning to grow rather bigger out here than they had looked from inside the bay, and when the wind came rushing along, there were sometimes little crests of foam to be seen, and now and then these dashed into the boat.

“I think, perhaps, we’d better put her about

now," he said, with a look of wise command directed towards Puck; "the storm might come over here, you know, and then we should get very wet—at least if it rained. You know how to put her helm round, Puck, don't you? Or shall I come and do it?"

"Of course I know," answered Puck rather indignantly; "you just manage the sail. It always flaps a great deal when we put her round on the other tack."

Milly and Bertie, greatly impressed by this nautical language, sat as still as mice watching their companions. Milly was rather disappointed at hearing they were to go back, but now that the sun was obscured and the wind getting up, it wasn't quite so nice upon the water, and Bertie was looking very solemn indeed.

"You're not frightened, are you?" she whispered.

"Oh no; only my inside feels funny," he answered, trying to put a brave face on matters. "I don't think I mind going home so very much."

Milly had no qualms of seasickness such as

were troubling Bertie, but she did think the boat was rocking rather wildly, and the sail seemed to be flapping and pulling them over, and the water was very near the edge of the boat, which seemed to be dipping quite down. She gave a little shriek, and threw herself towards the other side. Pickle was fighting fiercely with the sail, and she went to his assistance, and only just in time.

“ We must get it down,” he said ; and Milly helped with all her might, so that in a few more minutes the boat lay rocking on the waves, the sail furled up round the mast, whilst Bertie called out dismally that the water was all over his feet, and Pickle told him rather sharply to get the water can and bail it out as fast as he could.

“ You didn’t turn her head right a bit,” he said to Puck. “ We were nearly capsized that time.”

“ Then it was your fault with the sail,” retorted Puck, who was rather frightened. “ I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“ Let’s go home now,” cried Milly, a little piteously, though struggling hard against her rising fears ; “ the sun’s gone in, and I think it’s going

to rain, and oh ! what a flash of lightning that was ! ”

The boom of the thunder almost immediately after was even more alarming. Poor little Bertie, who was feeling very sick and queer, began to cry ; and Pickle looked towards the shore, and marveled how they could ever have got all that way from it in such a little time.

“ We can never row back,” was the thought in his heart ; “ we must get the sail up again somehow. We’ve sailed the *Swan* backwards and forwards. Why on earth won’t this old tub do the same ? It must be Puck’s fault.”

He saw that the spirit of the party was becoming damped, and he was the more resolved to keep up a bold front himself.

“ We must just pull her round with the sweeps,” he said in his commanding way, “ and then we’ll get the sail up all right. It’s only just the tacking that is a bit difficult. We’ll be racing home in a jiffy, you’ll see.”

This was consoling to Milly, who was half ashamed of her sudden fears, and now that the boat ceased to rock and plunge so wildly she began

to recover her courage ; and it was rather grand to be helping Pickle to pull the old boat round. She could do that quite well, as well as help Bertie with the bailing out, which he only prosecuted languidly, looking almost ready to cry. His face had a sickly greenish hue too, which rather distressed Milly, but Pickle said,—

“ He’s only seasick. Puck felt like that once or twice. He’ll be better soon.”

When the boat was really headed for the shore, Pickle tried experiments with the sail ; but do as he would, he couldn’t make the boat sail towards land. It would sail away, or it would sail sideways, but towards shore it would not go ; and indeed they seemed to be getting slowly farther and farther away, and Bertie suddenly burst into miserable crying, begging to be taken home, because he was so very poorly.

Pickle was beginning to wish very sincerely that they had never left their island. He looked back towards it with longing eyes. It would be a real city of refuge now, but alas ! it looked almost as far away as the mainland.

“ Can’t we row to it ? ” asked Milly, following

the direction of his eyes. "I'm quite cool now. I'm rather cold. I should like to row if we can't sail. We got out here so very quickly, it can't take so very long to row back."

It seemed the only thing to do, and Pickle consented to try. He took one oar, and Milly the other. Puck kept the tiller, and put the boat's head for their city of refuge, whilst Bertie lay along the bottom of the boat, heedless of damp or discomfort, only longing to be at home in his little bed.

"I hope father won't call it being a cockney," he once said pitifully to Milly, "but I can't help it. I do feel so sick. I wish we'd never come."

"I dare say Cornish boys are sometimes sick at sea," answered Milly consolingly. She hardly knew whether she wished they had not come or not. There was something rather exciting in the adventure, and if only they could get back to their city of refuge she thought she should be quite glad. It would make them feel that they really were sailors, to be able to manage a boat in a storm.

Milly had her back to the shore now, and was

pulling her oar very manfully. She thought they seemed to be going very fast through the water, though the waves were rather bigger than she liked, and seemed sometimes to rise up very near the edge of the boat. Still she thought they seemed to be getting through them very fast, and made up her mind that they would soon be at their journey's end now. She almost wondered why Puck did not exclaim that they were close in now. He only sat holding the tiller with a very solemn expression on his face.

"The waves are getting very big," he said at last; "I don't much like the look of them. This boat doesn't swim nicely, like the *Swan*. They look as though they'd come in on us every time."

Then Milly looked over her shoulder, and gave a little cry of astonishment and dismay.

"Why, we're farther off than when we started!" she cried.

"I think we get farther and farther away every minute," said Puck. "I should like to pull round, and put up the sail again, and go round the world like that. We should come to

our island again upside down, you know, and it would be much easier."

"It's the wind and the tide against us," said Pickle, with a rather anxious face. "We shall never get home at this rate."

A sob from Bertie was the only response to this remark. Milly was trying to choke back her tears, because she didn't want it cast in her teeth that girls always cried.

"What can we do?" said Puck.

"I think we'd better do as you said," answered Pickle—"get her head round, and put up a bit of sail, and run before the wind. I don't think the old boat is safe going against these big waves. She'll be all right the other way, and we shall fall in with some ship soon, and they'll take us on board; or perhaps we shall get to a coral island after all."

"I'd rather go home," sobbed Bertie; and Milly wondered if it was very silly of her, but she wanted much more now to be at home than to see a coral island.

Pickle put on a brave face, for he felt that he was the captain, and must support the failing

courage of his crew ; but he began to wish from the bottom of his heart that he had not thrown aside his good resolutions quite so quickly, and that he had never tried to sail a boat before Mr. Earle had given him leave.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAGICIAN'S CAVE.

ESTHER had taken her mother for a little drive upon that hot September afternoon, but they had not stayed out so long as usual. The banks of cloud rising in the sky had frightened Mrs. St. Aiden, and Esther turned the pony's head for home, not very wishful herself to test Punch's nerve in a thunderstorm.

They got home, however, before the first rumble sounded, and Mrs. St. Aiden went upstairs to lie down. She said that the heavy air made her head ache, and that perhaps she should get a nap before tea-time.

Esther had taken off her hat, and was watching the first flashes of the lightning amid the piled-up clouds, when the little maid came to say that there was a poor woman who wanted to speak to one of the ladies, and should she tell the mistress, or would Miss Esther see her ?

“Oh, I’ll go,” said Esther ; “ mother must not be disturbed.”

She ran down to the back gate. Genefer was out, and for the moment there was only the little maid available for any service. The cook was picking fruit in the garden over the road. She must not be hindered, as the rain would very likely soon come.

Esther did not remember ever to have seen this wrinkled old woman before. She did not know in the least who she was, nor what she wanted. She could only just understand her when she spoke, for she had a very broad, soft accent, and used many funny words that the little girl hardly understood.

At first she thought the woman must be making a mistake in what she was saying ; for she was telling Esther that the little gentlemen, and little Miss Milly from the rectory, were out in a boat on the bay, and that she was afraid there was a storm coming on, and had come up to tell somebody lest they should come to harm.

It was some time before Esther could be persuaded that there was not a mistake somewhere.

She could not believe that Pickle and Puck and the little Polperrans could possibly be out in a boat by themselves. But the old woman assured her that they were, and told her, in a half-frightened way, how they came down on most Saturdays and took her husband's old boat across to the little island opposite, where they played for a few hours and then came back. But it had always been calm and quiet on the water hitherto, and she had had no uneasiness on their account ; but now the wind was getting up, and it looked like a storm coming, and she thought she ought to tell somebody, and didn't know what to do lest her old man should be vexed with her. So she had come to see the ladies about it. Perhaps they could send somebody.

"Oh yes," answered Esther quickly, casting about in her mind what to do ; "I think I could find somebody who would help. Is the storm going to come very quickly ?"

"I don't think so very quick, missie, and they'll be all safe on the island ; they don't come back ever till a good bit later than this. But I don't like to think of them trying to get the heavy old

boat home alone, with the wind blowing off shore like this. I don't think as they could do it ; and it might get blown out to sea, and they would be skeered like."

Esther was a little scared herself at the bare thought.

She turned things quickly over in her mind. She had to take command of the situation. Genefer was away for the afternoon. Cook was no good in an emergency, as she always lost her head ; and it was one of Esther's tenets that her mother must be spared all worry and anxiety.

Whatever was to be done she must do herself, and her thoughts flew instantly to Mr. Earle. He had become something like a real friend to the little girl during these past weeks. She was not without a certain timid fear of his cleverness, his stores of occult knowledge, and the things in which he took part up at the Crag, which made folks shake their heads sometimes, and say that they feared some hurt to somebody would be the result. Yet for all that Esther believed in him thoroughly, and felt that he was certain to go to the aid of the boys if he knew their predicament,

and it must be her work to let him know as soon as possible.

She looked up at the threatening sky, but thunder and lightning did not frighten Esther much. She would have been glad of company through the dark pine wood, but she was not really afraid to go alone. She was more afraid of approaching the Crag at a time when it was popularly supposed that the master and his assistant were always engaged upon one of their uncanny experiments; but there seemed nothing else to be done, since the pony carriage had been already sent back by the boy in charge. After dismissing the woman with a small fee and a few words of thanks, Esther put on her hat once more and commenced the climb to the Crag.

She had got about half-way there when she uttered a little exclamation of joy, for there was Mr. Earle himself swinging away down the path as if to meet her.

She ran eagerly forward to meet him.

“O Mr. Earle, did they tell you too?”

“Tell me what?” he asked, stopping short and

looking straight at her. "What are you doing here all alone, with a storm coming up?"

"O Mr. Earle, it's the boys. I'm afraid about them. I was coming to ask you what to do." And then she plunged into the story, and told him exactly what the old woman had told her.

Mr. Earle's face looked a little grim as he heard, and his eyes scanned the clouds overhead and the aspect of things in general.

"Look here," he said to Esther in his clear, decisive way; "I'll tell you what we must do. Leave me to see after the boys. I'll go after them in the *Swan*; for they ought not to be alone any distance from land, with the wind getting up and blowing off shore. But if I do that for you, you must go up to the Crag for me with a message; and if the storm breaks, or looks very like breaking, you must stop up there till it's over. I'll leave word as I pass your house where you are, so that nobody will be uneasy about you."

Esther shook a little at the thought of going alone to the Crag, but she never thought of shirking.

"What is the message?" she asked.

“It’s like this,” said Mr. Earle, speaking rapidly and clearly : “Mr. Trelawny and I are at a standstill in some of our experiments for a certain chemical, which has been on order from London for some time. We think the carrier may have brought it to-day, and I’m on my way to the little shop to see if it’s been left. Mr. Trelawny is waiting for me in some impatience. You must take word that I shall probably be detained, and that I want him not to go on any farther till I come back. You can remember that, can’t you? You had better send Merriman to fetch him to come and see you; then you can explain all about it, and if you have once got him safe out of the laboratory, you keep him out. I don’t want him to go on experimenting without me. It wants two for that sort of thing. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” answered Esther, and then the pair parted. Mr. Earle went swinging down the path which passed the Hermitage and led to the village where the carrier’s cart deposited parcels; and Esther, with a very grave face, went slowly upwards towards the house upon the crag.

She was glad to think she need not seek Mr.

Trelawny himself amid his crucibles and retorts and strange apparatus ; but she was a little afraid at having to face him all alone, although she had been trying hard to conquer her fears of him, and she had to own that he was always especially kind to her.

She could not walk very fast here, for the ground was steep, and she had tired her limbs by hurrying along the first part of the way. The air seemed very hot and close about her, and she felt the sort of ache in her head which thunder often brought.

All of a sudden she gave a little jump, and stopped short, for she saw a strange thing just in front of her—a little spiral of sulphurous smoke, curling upwards from the ground, very much as she had read that it did when volcanoes were going to have an eruption ; and she very nearly forgot everything else, and turned to run away, when her steps were arrested by something even more alarming—the distinct sound of a groan, proceeding, as it seemed, from the very heart of the earth.

Esther's feet seemed rooted to the spot. She

could not run away now ; she had not the power. Meantime her wits were hard at work, and in a few moments she realized that she was close to the hole which the boys called the chimney of the underground cave, and the smoke she saw was coming up from that place, whilst the groan must surely have been uttered by some person down there.

All the old terror of that subterranean cave came like a flood over Esther—all the talk of the boys about prisoners and victims, and her own vague and fearful imaginings of the horrors of such places. She was shaking all over, and beads of moisture stood upon her brow. Reason for the moment had taken wing, and it seemed to Esther as though she had suddenly come upon some fearful mystery of human suffering.

There was some wretched human being in that cave, groaning in pain—bound, perhaps, in fetters, and awaiting some terrible doom. Could she leave him like that ? Having made this discovery, ought she not to pursue it farther ? Her heart beat to suffocation at the bare thought, but she fought fiercely with her fears. Had she not

resolved to overcome them ? And how could she leave this poor creature without seeking to do something ?

With failing limbs she crept towards the mouth of the shaft. She had looked down it many times before this, when the boys had been with her. But then there had been no smoke curling out of it, and no blood-curdling sounds coming up.

She could not put her head right over it to-day, for the smoke choked her and made her cough ; and immediately there seemed to come from below a sort of muffled cry.

Esther caught her breath and called back,—

“Is there anybody down there ? ”

“Yes ; come to me ! Help ! ” spoke the voice, which sounded from the very depths of the earth. And Esther's resolve was taken.

She must go. She must go herself, and at once. To summon help from the Crag might be worse than useless. This miserable victim was probably imprisoned there by the master of that place. Esther's mind had gone back for the moment to its old standpoint, and Mr. Trelawny was the terrible magician, whose doings were so

full of mystery if not of iniquity. If any captive were there, he had placed him in that terrible prison. His servants were probably in collusion with their master. If anything could be done, it must be done quickly and by herself alone.

"I'm coming!" she cried down the mouth of the shaft, and then set off to run for the door in the hillside, the position of which she knew perfectly by this time.

The boys had often shown it to her, and had shown her the trick of opening it. But they had never gone in. Mr. Trelawny had forbidden them to do so, knowing their mischievous tendencies. Esther had the free right of entrance, but she would sooner have put her head into a lion's mouth than have exercised it. She had never been in since that first day when she had had to be carried out by Mr. Trelawny. She had hoped never to have to enter the fearful place again.

But she must to-day, she plainly must, though her knees were quaking at the bare thought.

She had had one or two talks with Mr. Earle about fear of the dark and how to conquer it.

Esther was not afraid of the dark in the ordinary sense of the word. She was not afraid of going about in the dark in her own home ; for she had tried that, and only now and then, when in a nervous mood, had felt any fear. But she knew that she could not bear strange underground dark places, and she had once asked Mr. Earle if he thought she ought to go there to get used to them. But he had looked at her for a few moments, and had then said,—

“ No, I do not think so—not unless there were some object to be gained by it. There are many people in the world who dislike underground places, and avoid them. As a rule there is no call for them to conquer the dislike. Of course, if one could do any good by going, if there were some sufficient reason for it—if it were to help somebody else, for instance—then it would be right to try and overcome one’s repugnance. But without some such motive, I do not see that any one would be greatly benefited by going into uncongenial places of the kind.”

Esther thought of all this as she ran along. Hitherto it had been a comfort to her to think of

this decision. But now it seemed to her that the time had come when she was bound to go. Somebody wanted help. There was nobody but herself to give it. She might not be able to accomplish much, but at least she ought to go and see. To turn and run away would be like the priest and Levite in the parable, who left the poor man wounded and half dead. Everybody knew that they were wicked. She must try and copy the good Samaritan, who, she knew, was the type of Jesus Himself.

That thought came to her like a ray of comfort, and it helped to drive back the flood of her fears. Then she remembered what Mr. Earle had said about what his mother told him to do; and, just as she reached the strange old door in the hillside, Esther dropped upon her knees and buried her face in her hands.

It was only for a few seconds, but when she got up again she felt that she could go into the cave. A few minutes before, it had seemed as if it were almost impossible.

The heavy door yielded to her touch. She knew it would swing back again when she let it

go, so she took a big stone with her and set it wide open. There would be comfort in the feeling that there was light and air behind her, though the cave looked fearfully dark and gloomy, and the strange smell inside it, as she went slowly forward, brought back some of the dizzy feeling she had experienced upon her first visit.

A heavy groan smote upon her ears, and she gave a start and clasped her hands tightly together. She was through the passage now, and could just see the outline of the great dim cave. But where the living thing was that was making these sounds she could not guess. She stood quite still, and called timidly,—

“Is anybody there?”

“Yes, child,” answered a voice which she knew, now that she heard it more plainly. “Come a little nearer. I can’t see you. I’m afraid I’ve been an old fool; and if I haven’t blinded myself, I shall have better luck than I deserve.”

Esther sprang forward with a little cry of relief. It was no chained captive, no unknown, mysterious prisoner. It was Mr. Trelawny himself, and he was hurt.

In a moment she was by his side, bending over him, seeing a very blackened face and a brow drawn with pain. Mr. Trelawny was half sitting, half lying upon the cold floor of the cave, and there was a lot of broken glass all about him. So much she could see, and not much beside.

“ O Uncle Robert, I am so sorry ! What can I do ? ”

“ Isn't there a lot of glass about ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Well, there is a broom somewhere about. Get it and sweep it away, and I'll try to get up. Every time I've tried to move I've got my hands cut. I can't see a thing, and I've little power to help myself.”

Esther forgot all about being afraid now that there was something to do. She found the broom, and was soon sweeping away like a little housemaid. Now and then a groan broke from Mr. Trelawny, and at last she said gently,—

“ I think there's no more glass. Please, are you very much hurt ? ”

“ Earle will tell me I ought to have been blown into a thousand fragments,” was the rather grim

reply. " I think I've got off cheap. But I've had a tremendous electric shock ; and I'm a good bit cut and burnt, I expect. If only my eyes are spared, I'll not grumble at anything else. How came you here, child ? I thought I should have an hour or more to wait till Earle got back."

Esther explained then what had happened, for Mr. Trelawny, although in much pain, had all his wits about him ; and when he knew that Mr. Earle might be detained, he said to Esther,—

" Then you must be my attendant messenger instead. Go up by those stairs into the house, and fetch down Merriman and another of the men. I don't think I can get up there without more help than your little hands can give."

Esther quickly obeyed. She knew the way up into the house, and the key was in the door, so that she had no difficulty in getting there. The hall above was almost as dark by that time as the cave below ; for the storm had gathered fast, and the black clouds seemed hanging right over them. But Esther had other things to think of now, and she quickly summoned the men, and sent them down to Mr. Trelawny ; and then, being used in

her own house to illness, she ran for the housekeeper, and begged her to get oil and linen rag and wine and soup ready, because Mr. Trelawny had burnt and hurt himself, and somebody must look after him, till the doctor came, and he could not well be sent for till after the storm had gone by, for it was going to be a very bad one.

So before very long Mr. Trelawny was lying at full length upon a great wide oak settle in the hall, and Esther was gently bathing his cut and blackened and blistered face and hands, and covering up the bad places with oiled rag, as she had seen Genefer do when cook had burnt herself one day.

Mr. Trelawny kept his eyes closed, and he drew his breath rather harshly, like one in pain, and his brows were drawn into great wrinkles.

“Do I hurt you?” Esther asked from time to time. The housekeeper seemed to think that Esther had better do the actual handling of the patient while she kept her supplied with the things she wanted. Mr. Trelawny’s servants—and especially the women servants—stood in considerable awe of him. He never liked any attentions

from a woman that a man could bestow, and the housekeeper preferred to remain discreetly in the background, leaving Esther to play the part of nurse.

Esther was well used to the *rôle*, and had a gentle, self-contained way with her that had come from her long tendance upon her mother. Her touch was very soft and gentle, but it was not uncertain and timid. Indeed she did not feel at all afraid of Mr. Trelawny now, only afraid of hunting him.

“ No, no, child,” he answered when she put the question ; “ your little hands are like velvet. They don’t hurt at all. But what’s all that noise overhead ? ”

“ It’s the rain,” answered Esther. “ There is such a storm coming up. Hark ! don’t you hear the thunder ? And there was such a flash of lightning.”

Mr. Trelawny put his hand up to his eyes, and made an effort to open them, but desisted almost immediately, with an exclamation of suffering.

Esther clasped her soft little hands round one of his in token of sympathy. She could under-

stand the terrible fear which must possess him just now.

The servants had moved away by this time. They knew that the master did not like being looked at and fussed over. He had made a sign with his hand which they had understood to be one of dismissal, and Esther was alone with him now in this big place.

The storm was raging fearfully, but the child was not frightened. She had other things to think of, and she was thinking very hard.

“I hope Mr. Earle has got the boys safe,” she said, with a tone of anxiety in her voice.

There was no reply. Mr. Trelawny was suffering keenly both in mind and body. Esther looked at him, and realized that this was so. She hardly meant to speak the words out loud, but they came into her head and they passed her lips almost before she was aware of it.

“Jesus can stop the storms and make them quiet again, and keep people safe in them. And He can make blind people see.”

There was no reply; but Esther felt one of the bandaged hands feel about as if for something,

and she put her own little hand into it at once. The fingers closed over it, and the man and the child sat thus together for a very long time.

Then there was a little stir in the hall, as the butler appeared, bringing tea ; and Mr. Trelawny told Esther to get some, and give him a cup, as he was very thirsty.

She was glad enough to serve him, and did so daintily and cleverly ; and before they had finished, the storm had very much abated. The rain still fell, and the wind blew ; but the sun was beginning to shine out again, and Esther knew that the worst was over now.

“ It is light again now,” she said. “ It was so dark all that time—almost as dark as the cave.”

Mr. Trelawny looked more himself now. The pain of his burns was soothed by the dressing laid upon them, and the lines in his face had smoothed themselves out.

“ Ah, the cave !” he repeated. “ I thought that the cave was your special abhorrence, Esther. How came you to be there all alone to-day ?”

“ I came after you,” answered Esther. “ I heard somebody groan and call for help.”

“ Did you know who was calling ? ”

“ No, the voice sounded so muffled and strange.”

“ I wonder you weren't afraid, you timid little mouse. Suppose it had been some great, rough smuggler fellow, such as used to live in that cave long ago ! ”

“ But I knew he was hurt ; he was groaning and calling for help.”

“ And that gave you courage ? ”

Esther hesitated.

“ I don't think I felt very brave, but I knew I ought to go.”

“ Why ought you ? ”

“ O Uncle Robert, you know we ought always to help people when they are in trouble—especially if they are hurt.”

“ Didn't you think you might get hurt too ? ”

Esther's face was rosy now, though he could not see it.

“ I thought a great many silly things,” she confessed softly. “ I think I have been very silly and cowardly often, but I'm going to try not to

be any more. I don't think I should mind going down into the cave again now."

"Tell me what you thought about it before," said Mr. Trelawny, in his imperious way ; and though it was rather a hard command to obey, Esther thought it might, perhaps, amuse him to hear some of the things that she and the boys together had imagined about him, and perhaps he would tell her then how much of it all was true. So she told what Puck had said about the tanks where skeletons were pickled, and about the electric eye, and the elixir of life, and the different things that different persons had said, and the interpretation the boys had put upon their words, and how she had fancied that the groans she heard that day must proceed from some miserable captive destined for one of the tanks. It was rather hard to say all this, for some of it sounded quite silly now ; but Esther bravely persevered, for she thought if she could once talk it right out she might never feel so frightened again.

Mr. Trelawny lay still, and she could not quite see the expression on his face, because it was

partly covered up ; but at last he seemed able to contain himself no longer, and he broke into a real laugh—not quite so loud or so gruff as usual, but very hearty for all that.

At the sound of that laugh Esther's fears seemed to take wing. It must all have been nonsense, she was sure. Nobody who had really been doing wicked and cruel things would laugh to know that they had been found out.

“ I shall have to take you over my laboratory one of these days, and really show you my pickled skeletons, and my electric eye, and all the other mysteries. Now you need not shake, my dear. I have nothing in pickle worse than a specimen animal ; and as for the electric eye, that is very far from being perfect, and it will be a long while before I can make you understand its use, or what we mean by the term. Anyhow, it is not an eye that we carry about with us. In your mind it would not be an eye at all, though it has some analogy to one. And as for the elixir of life, my dear, I would not drink of it if I were to find it. To live forever in this mortal world of ours would be a poor sort of thing ; and we

know that there is an elixir of life preparing for us, of which we shall all drink one day—all to whom it is given, that is. And then there will be new heavens and a new earth, and we shall all be glorified together.”

Esther sat very still, trying to take in the magnitude of that idea, and feeling that she should never be afraid of Mr. Trelawny again, now that she had spoken so freely of her fears to him, and he had been so kind, and had said such nice things.

The shadows were beginning to fall now, and she was wondering how long she would have to stay here. She did not mean to leave Mr. Trelawny till Mr. Earle got back to take care of him; but she began to wish that he would come, and that she might get news of the boys.

At last the sound of a firm, ringing step was heard without, and Esther sprang to her feet. The big door was open, for it was quite warm still, though the rain had taken the sultriness out of the air. She ran out, and met Mr. Earle face to face. He was wet through and almost dripping, but he looked as quiet and composed as ever.

“O Mr. Earle, where are the boys?”

“Safe at home in bed, like a pair of drowned rats. It was a good thing you came to warn me, Esther, or they might have been miles out at sea by this time, or else at the bottom of it.”

Esther's face paled a little.

“O Mr. Earle, what did they do?”

“You'd better run home and hear all about it from them. I thought you'd be back before I was.”

“O Mr. Earle, I couldn't go till you came. Mr. Trelawny has hurt himself. They've sent for the doctor now. But they couldn't just at first, the storm was so bad. Please, will you go to him? Then I can go home. But may I come again to-morrow to see how he is?”

Mr. Earle had uttered a startled exclamation at hearing Esther's words, and was now striding into the hall, almost forgetful of her.

“Trelawny!” she heard him exclaim; and then Mr. Trelawny said in his dry way,—

“Yes; crow over me now as much as you like. I neglected your valuable advice, and see the result!”

Mr. Earle went and bent down over him ; and Esther, feeling her task done, took her hat and stole out into the soft dusk, and ran down the hill home as fast as she could.

CHAPTER X.

CONFESSIONS.

ESTHER found Genefer at the door on the lookout for her.

“O Miss Esther, my dear, I am glad to see you! I was getting fidgety about you—so long away up there, and the storm and all. But you are not wet through at all events,” feeling the condition of her clothing and the temperature of her hands. “Why did you stay such a time up there after the storm was over?”

“I stayed with Mr. Trelawny; he has been hurt. I found him in the cave where he tries his experiments. I didn’t like to leave him till Mr. Earle came back. But the boys, Genefer—what about them?”

“Oh, they’re in bed—the best place for them too. They were just soaked to the skin, and Master Percy had some of the pluck taken out

of him. I don't know just what it was all about. I was busy getting them put into a hot bath, and then tucked up between hot blankets. Master Philip doesn't seem any the worse. He was asking for you all the time. I said you would go up as soon as you got in."

"I will," said Esther. "I've had my tea up at the Crag. How is mama?"

"Lying down still with a headache. She got a bit upset when the boys were brought in, so when I'd seen to them I coaxed her to go to bed, and I hope she's asleep. The thunder upset her head, as it almost always does. I wouldn't go to her unless she calls to you going by."

Esther lingered a moment by her mother's door, but no voice summoned her in, so she went upstairs, and soon heard Pickle's unmistakable tones urging her to speed.

"Is that you, Essie? Come along! What a time you've been! We've got such things to tell you! Come on!"

Esther pushed open the boys' door, and entered the room where two small beds stood side by side, and a small boy occupied each. Puck was

snuggled down in his, though his eyes were wide open; but Pickle was sitting up, quivering with excitement to tell his tale to more sympathetic ears than those of either Mr. Earle or Genefer.

“O Esther! why didn’t you come before? We’ve such things to tell you! Where have you been?”

“Up with Mr. Trelawny at the Crag. He’s hurt himself. I had to stay with him. O Pickle, what were you doing? The old fisherman’s wife said you were on the little island, and couldn’t get back. Did Mr. Earle come and fetch you?”

“Oh, she let on to somebody, did she? I didn’t quite understand about that part of it. Well, perhaps it was a good thing she did. But, I say, Esther, we did have a jolly old time of it for a bit. We went such a sail by ourselves. If it hadn’t been for that stupid storm coming up and spoiling it, we could have showed everybody that we could manage a boat first-rate.”

“Bertie was sick,” chimed in Puck from his nest, “and I didn’t like it when we couldn’t get to shore. I thought we were going to be upset

and drowned once. I didn't like that part of it."

Esther looked from one to the other in some bewilderment and anxiety.

"O boys, what did you do?"

Then Pickle plunged headlong into the story. It was all rather mixed up and difficult for Esther to follow, but she began to understand that the boys had taken advantage of their liberty on Saturdays to go off regularly to the little island, and that they had kept this "city of refuge" quite as a secret of their own.

"I shouldn't have minded telling you," said Pickle, "only we thought perhaps you'd tell Mrs. Poll-parrot, or Pretty Polly, and then all the fun would have been gone."

"It wouldn't have been a city of refuge if the avenger of blood could come after us in another boat and take us away," added Puck. "I'm afraid it won't be a city of refuge any longer now. I wish we hadn't gone sailing, but just gone home. Then nobody would have known anything."

"Were you out on the water in the storm?"

asked Esther, with a little shiver. "O Pickle, you should not have been so disobedient. You know Mr. Earle and Mr. Trelawny would not let you sail the boat alone."

"Not the *Swan*," said Pickle quickly, "but nobody had said anything about that old tub."

Esther looked rather grave, and a quick wave of color swept over Pickle's face.

"I wanted to do it," he said in rather a low voice; "perhaps that was why it seemed all right."

"You might have been drowned," said Esther in a voice of awe; "Mr. Earle said so himself."

"I thought so once," said the boy; "I was frightened then."

"Tell me about it," said Esther with a little shiver. She sat down on the side of Puck's bed, and he got fast hold of her hand. He was more subdued than Pickle, though Esther could see that even the bold elder boy had received a considerable shock to his nerves. His eyes were bright, and he was excited and not quite himself.

"We had always wanted so much to sail the boat," said he in response to Esther, "but there

had never been any wind. And to-day, when it began just to blow a little, it seemed just the very thing. So we got in and went off, and it was delicious. We did it beautifully, and it was all pretty and sunny on the sea, and we went along finely. But by and by the waves got bigger, and Bertie began to get sick, and some of them wanted to get home again. So we tried to tack her round as Mr. Earle does, but she wouldn't go against the wind a bit, and the waves splashed in and wet us. And then we tried to row, but we only got farther and farther away from land, and the sea got rougher and rougher. And Bertie was sick and frightened, and everybody wanted to get home, and we couldn't."

"O Pickle, how dreadful! What did you do?"

"Well, we had to turn round at last and run before the wind," answered the boy, with as much of the sailor air as he could assume. "I saw it was the only thing to try for. The waves were all right if you didn't try to meet them; and we thought perhaps we should meet a ship which would take us up."

“That might have been rather nice,” said Puck, “only it got so dark, and then the thunder and lightning came; and oh, how it did rain! We couldn’t see anything. We felt like being all alone on the sea. I was frightened then, and Bertie was awfully sick, and Milly began to cry. I wanted to cry, too, only I thought it would be like a girl.”

Esther was shivering herself at the bare picture of all these horrors. She had nothing but sympathy for the boys now, though she knew that it had been the spirit of disobedience which had prompted them to this daring escapade.

“Oh, what did you do?” she asked, in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

“We couldn’t do anything but sail on and on,” answered Pickle; “but Puck said,—

“Yes, we could. Milly proposed it. We all said our prayers; and Milly reminded us about Jesus walking on the water, and making the storm stop. So we asked Him to come and do the same for us.”

“The storm did stop by and by,” said Esther in a low voice.

“ Yes, it did—almost just after we’d been praying,” said Puck ; “ and when the rain went away and the sun came out, we saw the *Swan* coming after us as hard as ever it could come. Bertie thought perhaps it was Jesus coming to us on the water, but it was only Mr. Earle.”

“ Perhaps Jesus sent him to you,” said Esther in a low voice.

“ He said it was you who sent him,” said Pickle the practical.

“ Yes, in one way,” answered Esther, coloring up, for she was shy of uttering her deeper thoughts ; “ but I shouldn’t have known if the old woman hadn’t come up. Perhaps it was Jesus who sent her—I mean, put it into her head to come.”

“ Do you think so ? ” asked Puck, with wide-open eyes, and Esther answered softly and steadily,—

“ Yes, I do.”

Puck suddenly scrambled up in his bed and got upon his knees.

“ Genefer put us to bed without our prayers—she was in such a hurry,” he said. “ I’d like to

say my prayers now, because I'm very much obliged, if it was like that. It's mean not to thank people when they've done things for you. Let's all say our prayers together."

Esther immediately knelt down beside the little bed, and in a moment Pickle was out and on his knees beside her. They both hid their faces, and a few half-whispered words and snorts from Puck, who was very much in earnest, alone broke the silence of the upper room. But presently Esther felt that the child kneeling beside her was quivering all over, and suddenly Pickle broke down and began to sob uncontrollably.

This was a strange thing in Pickle, who had hardly shed a tear all the months he had been under the roof of the Hermitage, and Esther was distressed and almost frightened at the sudden vehemence of the outburst. She put her arms round him, and rather to her surprise he did not repulse her overture of sympathy, but clung to her convulsively, weeping silently, but with great gasping sobs, that seemed wrung from him by some power too strong to be resisted.

Puck crept into bed again, and watched his

brother with wondering eyes. But Nature was claiming her dues now from both, and Puck's eyes grew heavy with sleep even as he watched, and soon shut themselves up altogether. Not even curiosity, or the remains of the excitements through which they had passed, could keep him longer from the land of dreams.

"Pickle dear," said Esther gently at last, "won't you let me put you to bed? You will be getting cold."

"Don't go away then," he said between his sobs. "Hold my hand and sit with me. I don't want to be left alone."

How well Esther understood that appeal! She knew without any telling that if left alone all the horrors of that dangerous voyage would come back over the boy's mind, as they had never done at the moment when the things were happening. She felt as though a bond of sympathy had been established between herself and her manly little cousin. Hitherto he had never shown weakness in her presence. Now he was clinging to her as though he felt her presence to be a source of strength and refreshment.

She held his hands, and sometimes spoke softly to him, and presently the sobs ceased. But he did not on that account let go his hold upon her. She felt the grasp of his fingers tighten on her hands.

"Esther," he said presently, "I was the one who thought of it all and planned it all. It was disobedience. I think I knew it was all the time, only I wouldn't think about it. I wanted to do as I liked. I always do. Esther, suppose the boat had gone down and we had been drowned, would that have been dying in one's sins?"

"O Pickle, I don't know!"

"I know there's something in the Bible about dying in our sins. I thought it meant going to hell. Esther, should I have gone to hell?"

"O Pickle dear, I don't think so!"

"Don't you? But I was being naughty all the time."

"We are all naughty very often," said Esther gently, "but you know Jesus said He would give eternal life to every one who believed in Him. You do believe in Jesus, don't you, Pickle, even though you forget and are naughty sometimes?"

“Yes, I do,” answered the boy, very soberly and steadily. “It was the only thing that helped us not to be very badly afraid when it was all dark and the thunder and lightning came. But it was Milly who thought of it. She cried, but she helped us the most. And when the rain seemed to be right off, and we saw the sun coming through again, and there was the *Swan* racing along after us, why, then it did just seem as though He were coming to us on the water, as Puck said.”

“I think He was,” said Esther, with a little quiver in her voice; and Pickle squeezed her hands, and she squeezed his, and they were silent a few minutes. Then the boy spoke again,—

“Essie, I must go to-morrow and tell Mr. Polperran all about this.”

“Won’t he know from Milly and Bertie?”

“Yes, but I must tell him too. It wasn’t their fault. It was I who did everything—getting the boat, and the city of refuge, and then going sailing when there was a breeze. That’s what I want to tell him. He trusted me to take care of the little ones—he told me so once—and I nearly

drowned them. And it wasn't that I forgot about what Mr. Earle had said about not trying to sail alone. I remembered it every bit, but I didn't choose to obey. I pretended to myself that he had only said we mustn't sail the *Swan*, but I knew he'd never let us go sailing alone in any boat. I'll tell him so, and get him to set me a punishment; and I'll tell Mr. Polperran too, and ask him to forgive Milly and Bertie, and only to be angry with me."

Pickle spoke with subdued vehemence, and with great earnestness. Esther approved his resolution.

"Mr. Polperran is a very kind man," she said. "I don't think he'll be angry exactly; and you will never do it any more."

"I'm going to try and be obedient," said Pickle with a little sigh. "Mr. Earle is always telling us that we shall never be any good anywhere till we learn to obey; but I never quite believed him before. I do now."

Pickle was growing soothed and comforted now. Esther sat beside him till he dropped off to sleep. He was thoroughly tired out, and the burst of tears had relieved the overcharged brain.

When he was sound asleep, the little girl covered him up and kissed him in motherly fashion, and stole away to see if her mother had awakened.

Mrs. St. Aiden was ready now to hear the story of the adventures of her little daughter, and a modified account of the peril in which the boys had placed them. She shuddered a little over the latter, but was not conversant enough with the subject to thoroughly realize how near the children had been to a tragic death. She was more immediately interested in the accident that Mr. Trelawny had met with in his cave-like laboratory, and made Esther repeat the story of her adventure more than once.

“Dear, dear, poor man ! I do hope his sight will not be permanently injured ; it would be such a terrible loss. Mr. Polperran has always been afraid of some accident. He has said to me many times that he was afraid Mr. Trelawny was sometimes too eager to be cautious ; and, poor man, I am afraid it was so to-day. What a good thing you found him when you did, Esther ! It must have been so bad for him down there in that lonely

place. You will be more of a favorite with him that ever."

Esther's eyes opened rather wide at that.

"Am I a favorite?" she asked; and her mother broke into a little laugh.

"Have you never found that out yet, child? Ah! you are always so frightened at him. Perhaps you will get over that now. You will find that he does not mean to eat you."

"I think I have been rather silly," said Esther soberly; "but I have been trying not to be so afraid of things lately."

"Yes, that is wise; for Mr. Trelawny is really our very kind friend, though he is strange and sometimes rough in his ways. And I have not quite forgiven him yet for cutting off your hair."

"I have been so much more comfortable without it, mama," said Esther, ruffling up her wavy crop. "My head never aches now, and it is so nice not to have all the tangles to pull out."

"Well, dear, I have got used to it now, and if you are more comfortable I am glad. All the same, it was a liberty for anybody to take; but

Mr. Trelawny is not like anybody else, and it is no use minding."

Next day Esther and Pickle were the only two able to go to church from the Hermitage. Puck was sleeping on so soundly that Genefer would not have him wakened; and Mrs. St. Aiden was still feeling the effects of the storm of the previous day, and was not able to attempt the service, though she was able now to go to church sometimes.

The children looked eagerly towards the rectory pew, but nobody appeared there except Prissy, who was looking very prim and rather severe; and she would not throw so much as a glance towards Esther and Pickle, though the little girl was really anxious to catch her eye and telegraph a question to her.

At the proper place in the service Mr. Polperan rose, and said in a voice which had a little tremor in it, that a father and mother desired to return thanks to Almighty God for the preservation of their own children, and some others, in a great danger to which they had been exposed.

It came quite unexpectedly, and Pickle threw

a hasty glance at Esther, whilst the color flamed all over his face ; and as the words of the General Thanksgiving were spoken, with the special clause which sounded strangely impressive as read by Mr. Polperran that day, his head sank lower upon his folded arms, and Esther saw his shoulders heave, and felt her own warm tears gathering under their long lashes.

But it comforted her to hear this public recognition of God's care for His children in their peril. It seemed to bring home to her the mysterious and wonderful truth about the fall of the sparrow—the individual care and love which God feels towards every single living atom in His vast creation. And the sound of the fervent amen which passed through the church at the close seemed to speak of the universal brotherhood of those who owned the Lord as their Master ; and though Esther could not have told the reason of it, a strange sense of sweetness came into her soul, and a peaceful assurance of God's Fatherhood crept over her spirit and took up its habitation there.

Pickle was wonderfully quiet and attentive

during the rest of the service, even listening to the sermon as he had never listened before.

Was it a coincidence, or had the father's heart been moved by what he had heard yesterday, so that he had prepared his discourse after the return of his children from their hour of peril? Esther did not know, but she gave a little start when the clergyman read out his text, for it was nothing more or less than the account of how the Lord came to His disciples walking on the water, and how His presence with them there brought them immediately to the desired haven.

Pickle squeezed her hand tight as the impressive words were read out, and his attention never wavered for a moment during the whole of the simple discourse, which went home to many hearts that day; for it was known all over the place by this time that the rector's children had been in great danger, and there was something in Mr. Polperran's way of dealing with his subject which showed that his heart was full of thankfulness for their escape, and that he could not forget the peril in which they had been placed.

At the close of the service Esther and Pickle

remained in their places till the congregation had pretty well dispersed, and then found their way round to the vestry door from which the clergyman would take his departure. The boy's resolve had only been strengthened by the emotions of the morning. He must ask the forgiveness of Milly and Bertie's father before he could be happy again.

Mr. Polperran came out looking rather absorbed, but when his eyes fell upon the two children his face lighted. He put out both his hands towards Pickle, and drew the little boy towards himself, saying,—

“They tell me that you were their greatest help, and never lost courage, and saved the boat from being upset by your clever handling. My dear, brave, little man, I shall not forget that. If you had not had the presence of mind to get the boat round and let her run before the wind, she must have been swamped.”

Pickle was so taken aback by receiving praise and kindness instead of blame that for a moment his breath seemed taken away, but then he burst out with all the greater emphasis,—

“O sir, you mustn’t call me brave ; you mustn’t think me clever, or anything that is good. I was very naughty and disobedient, and I led them all into it. It was all my fault. They would never have thought of it but for me. I don’t think they would ever have gone in a boat at all, even to the city of refuge, if I hadn’t taken them. It was disobedience. Perhaps they didn’t think of it, but I did. I want to be punished for it ; I don’t want to be praised. I was very conceited, and thought I knew such a precious lot. When the storm came, I found I didn’t know anything. I was frightened, though perhaps they didn’t know. But I was. I knew I had done wrong. I thought God was angry with us. It was Milly who helped us most. It’s she you ought to praise. I was naughty. I’m very sorry. I want to ask you to forgive me.”

The last words came out almost with a sob. They were not easy words for Pickle to speak. He had not been used to make confession of his misdeeds, or to ask forgiveness. In the old days he had taken things much more lightly. But something new seemed to have come into his life now ;

and perhaps Mr. Polperran understood, for he sat down a little while upon the low stone wall, and talked very gravely and kindly to Pickle, and then forgave him fully for his share in the act of disobedience which might have ended so badly, and sent the children home with warm hearts and smiling faces, although there was real seriousness in their hearts.

“He is a very nice man,” said Pickle with emphasis. “I think he is very good too. I like him better than Mrs. Pol—Polperran. But I’ll tell her I’m sorry when I see her next. I shan’t like to, but I will. I’m sorry Bertie’s sick and has got a cold. But I daresay he’ll be better soon.”

Puck was up and dressed when they got back, and quite interested to hear about the thanksgiving, and the sermon, and the talk with Mr. Polperran afterwards. He was not quite so serious as Pickle, but then he had not quite the same weight upon his conscience. He had always been used to follow the lead of his brother, and though he was quite aware that they had been disobedient to a certain extent, he had not the same burden

of responsibility as that which weighed upon the elder boy.

Mr. Earle had not been in church, so there was no news of Mr. Trelawny; and after the early dinner, Esther and Pickle walked up to ask after him. Puck felt indisposed for the exertion, and remained at home. Mrs. St. Aiden expressed her intention of walking as far as the rectory to inquire for Milly and Bertie, and Puck said he would like to go with her.

As Esther and Pickle climbed the hill, he asked her about Mr. Trelawny, and listened with immense interest as she told the tale of her doings that afternoon.

“Weren’t you afraid to go in? I thought you couldn’t bear the cave. O Essie, I wish I had been there! But I never thought you’d dare go in.”

“I didn’t want to much,” answered Esther in her grave way, “but it seemed like my duty.”

Pickle pondered a while, and then said suddenly,—

“It’s better to be frightened doing our duty than frightened because we’ve been disobedient

and naughty and horrid things have come that needn't have done if we'd been good."

Esther turned this over in her mind for a while, and then looked at Pickle with a kindling smile.

"And yet we were both helped and taken care of. Pickle, I do think Jesus is very, very good."

"So do I," he answered, looking down and kicking the soft pine-needles under his feet; and after that they walked in silence up to the Crag.

Nobody was about upon the terrace, which seemed strange on such a fine afternoon; but Mr. Earle came down to see the children, and gave them the report of Mr. Trelawny.

"His eyes are bandaged up still, and will have to be for some little time yet; and the burns, though they are not deep or dangerous, are rather painful. He says nobody touches them so gently as his 'little nurse.' That is you, Esther. He is to be kept quite quiet for a few days, and then the doctor will be able to judge better what is the extent of the mischief. That is as much as I can tell you to-day."

Esther's face was full of concern.

"Oh, I am so sorry. Can I go and see him?"

Fancy her asking this of her own accord!

"If he had not just dropped asleep you should have done so. He would have liked it; but he must not be disturbed, for he had a bad night, and now he has taken a draught, and perhaps will sleep some hours. But I will tell him you have been to ask, and will come and see him another day."

"To-morrow," said Esther promptly; "and please, Mr. Earle, mama says she thinks we had better have a week's holiday, so that you can stay with Mr. Trelawny, and we can go blackberrying and nutting. We didn't have a holiday in August because we had not worked long enough."

"I am much obliged to your mother for the kind thought," said Mr. Earle. "I think a holiday will do none of you any harm just now, and I shall be glad to have the time with my old friend."

He stopped and looked rather earnestly at Esther, and then said,—

"What was it that took you into the cave to find Mr. Trelawny on Saturday?"

"I heard him groan and call out. The sound came through the chimney."

"Did you know who it was?"

"No; but it was somebody who wanted help."

"I thought you were too frightened to go into underground places. Didn't you once tell me so?"

Esther's face crimsoned over, but Pickle broke in,—

"That's what I said just now; but she went because she thought it was her duty."

"I thought somebody wanted help, and it would be unkind not to," said Esther, hanging her head.

"But you were afraid?"

"Rather." She paused and hesitated, and then looked up quickly into Mr. Earle's face. "I remembered what you had told me about when you were a little boy, and what your mother had said. I did that too. Then I wasn't so frightened."

She knew he understood, for she felt the touch of his hand upon her shoulder. She was too shy to look up again, but next moment she heard him ask another question.

“ Esther, suppose you had been afraid, and had not gone in and got Mr. Trelawny safely out of the cave, do you know what would have happened ? ”

“ No.”

“ If he had lain there till I got back, he would have been a dead man.”

Esther started and looked up with scared eyes, and Pickle drew a long whistling breath.

“ Oh, I say ! ” he murmured, with staring eyes.

“ It is quite true,” went on Mr. Earle. “ You would not understand if I were to try and tell you ; but Mr. Trelawny had been trying a dangerous experiment. I do not think he knew himself how dangerous it was. The first explosion was enough to injure him and reduce him to the state in which you found him ; but there was worse afterwards. He probably did not know it, not being able to see ; but there was something going on all the time which must quite shortly after you left the cave with him have made a second and a worse explosion. Had anybody been there then he could not have lived. I suppose the thunderstorm prevented this sound from

being heard, but a number of things down below are shattered to atoms that were all safe in their places when the servants went down at your bidding."

Esther's face had grown pale with excitement and awe. It was rather a terrible thing to feel how nearly Mr. Trelawny had lost his life. Suppose she had not heard him. Suppose she had let her fears get the better of her. Oh, how glad she was that she had been trying to conquer them before! That had made it much easier when the moment for proving herself came.

The children walked very gravely away hand in hand. Then Pickle suddenly burst out,—

"I say, Essie, it's you who have taken the palm after all. You are really the heroine. I used to think girls were no good. But I think it's boys now."

"O Pickle, I don't think I like to be praised. I've been so silly often and often. But I am very happy and glad. Still I don't think I should have dared to go in if it hadn't been for what Mr. Earle told me once."

"What did he tell you? I wanted to ask."

Then Esther told of the talk in the old ruin, and Pickle listened very attentively.

“What a lot of different things God had to see to that afternoon,” he remarked very soberly, after a long pause; “I do think it was awfully good of Him.”

“So do I,” answered Esther softly; “I should like always to do what He wants us to now.”

“Well, we’ll try,” said Pickle with emphasis. “I think after all this it would be mean not to.”

CHAPTER XI.

MR. TRELAWNY.

“I’M not sure that mama will let them go. We have been very much disappointed and displeased,” said Prissy in her primmest way. “I’m not blaming you, Esther; you knew no more about it than I did myself. But the children had all conspired together to deceive us. Of course we have been very much hurt, mother and I.”

“I think children always like a secret,” said Esther in her gentle, womanly way, which was not in the least like Prissy’s primness; “but I know that my boys were most to blame, and Pickle is very sorry indeed for his disobedience. But I hope Mrs. Polperran will let Milly and Bertie come with us, even if you do not care to come. We have got our lunch in baskets, and Punch will carry everything, and we can ride him in turns if we are tired, and Mr. Earle says there

are splendid nuts and blackberries in Mr. Trelawny's woods. We shall have such a nice time!"

"I'll go and ask mother," said Prissy. "Of course Milly and Bertie would like it, but after what has occurred, you know—" And there Prissy stopped short, pursed up her lips, and looked unutterable things.

Esther could not help feeling glad that the boys were waiting at the gate with Punch. She was not sure whether Pickle's penitence would stand the strain of these airs on Prissy's part. She felt her own cheeks tingling a little. She felt that she did not at all like her boys found fault with by Prissy, even though she knew they had been naughty. Pickle had owned up his fault to Mr. Polperran like a man, and had received forgiveness. It did not seem quite fair to Esther that anything more should be said about it.

The next minute Mrs. Polperran came in, kind and fussy, as was her way.

"If you are going with them, Esther dear, I will send them. But I have been very much shocked and disturbed, as you will understand.

I had always been able to trust my children before. It has been very sad to think that they have been instructed in the ways of deceitfulness."

Mrs. Polperran shook her head, and Esther felt her cheeks growing red. She knew that there had been disobedience, but she was sure that her boys had not meant to deceive. They had been accustomed to liberty and a good bit of their own way. They had not been brought up under any obligation to tell everything they did. It was not fair to accuse them of deceit. It was a great relief at this moment to see Mr. Polperran's head appear over that of his wife in the doorway.

"Tut, tut, tut, my dear! don't let us call things by harder names than we need. The little ones did tell me that they had a place down on the shore where they went and played, and I gave them free leave to do so. Indeed, I was glad they should have bolder spirits to play with. I didn't know they went off to the island; but, upon my word, I don't think I should have interfered if I had. The bay is perfectly safe, and that tub of old Jerry's could hardly overturn with anything the children might do. Of course they

were wrong to try and sail it, and to leave the shelter of the bay ; but the boys have seen their fault, and all the children have asked and obtained forgiveness. Now, I don't want another word said about it. They were sufficiently punished by their fright, and they have learned a lesson they will not forget. Don't weaken the effect of it by talking too much. What has Esther come about to-day ? ”

Esther's invitation was soon repeated, and Mr. Polperran's kind face beamed.

“ To be sure, to be sure !—just the very thing for little folks. Let them go ? Why, of course. They can't get into any danger up there, and I don't think they'll try to. Bertie wants the current of his thoughts changed. It will do him good to go. I'll answer for it there will be no getting into mischief now. Come, mama ; you don't grudge them a day's pleasuring, I'm sure. I'll go and fetch the young rascals down, and start them all off together.”

Mrs. Polperran raised no objection, though she looked a little doubtful. Prissy decided not to accompany the party, and Esther did not seek

to shake her determination ; she could not help feeling that they would be happier without her.

Milly and Bertie came down clinging to their father's hands. Milly looked none the worse for the adventure of the Saturday afternoon. Bertie had not quite got his color back, but the threatening of cold had been averted by prompt measures, and, as Mr. Polperran always declared, there was nothing like fresh air and the breath of the sea and the woods for dissipating any little ailment and putting people in trim again.

“ Now, be good boys and girls, all of you,” he said ; “ have plenty of fun, but don't get into mischief. Learn to be brave lads and lassies, making friends with nature wherever you go. That's the way to grow up fine men and women. Don't you be afraid of anything in the world except doing wrong.”

Punch was at the gate with the little people, a basket slung on each shoulder, and a saddle on his back. Bertie was lifted up for a ride, as his legs were the smallest, and he had been a little poorly for two days after the adventure in the boat. But his eyes were dancing now with de-



"Punch was at the gate, with Bertie in the saddle."—Page 266.

Esther's Charge.

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light at the prospect before him ; and when they started off and had turned the corner, Milly gave a little hop, skip, and jump, and cried,—

“ Oh, how nice it is to get away ! I am so glad that Prissy isn’t coming ! ”

Esther was very nearly saying, “ So am I,” and she saw that the words were on the very tip of Pickle’s ready tongue. But she was glad that he did not speak them, but only looked at her with a laugh in his eyes, and Puck asked solemnly,—

“ Has she been lecturing you all round ? ”

“ Oh yes,” sighed Milly, “ ever so much worse than father and mother. Father was very kind indeed, though he made me feel more sorry about it than anybody. But he understands about what we feel like—I mean, he knows that it is nice to do things, and to get away from people, and to play we’re sailing off to coral islands and places like that. I don’t think he’s going to stop our going out in the old boat to the city of refuge.”

“ Isn’t he ? How jolly of him ! ” cried Pickle ; “ I thought our city of refuge was gone forever.”

“ I don’t think he minds a bit,” cried Bertie, “ for I talked about it a lot, and he said he’d come with us some day and see it. I said I thought the avenger of blood would always be coming after us now. I meant Prissy, you know, and he knew it. And then he laughed and said he thought the avenger of blood would think a long time before following us there ; and I’m sure he meant that Prissy would be frightened, and I dare say she would.”

“ Besides, if we have the boat she can’t come,” cried Puck. “ I was afraid Mr. Earle would be the avenger of blood, and would come in the *Swan*.”

“ I don’t think anybody will come,” said Milly. “ I heard father telling mother that he was very glad we had some games like what he and his brothers used to play. He said he’d rather we got into a scrape now and then, than grow up afraid to wet our feet, like so many little cats.”

Pickle burst out laughing, and the party felt inspirited by the feeling that Mr. Polperran’s sympathy was with them in their love of adventure, although not in their disobedience to definite

commands. They distinguished very clearly between the two.

It was a perfect September day, and they had a delightful time wandering through the great copses on Mr. Trelawny's property, filling their baskets with blackberries, and feasting themselves at the same time.

At noon they had a delightful surprise, for Mr. Earle found them out, and brought them a big jar of cream and some excellent cake, and shared their picnic with them at their own eager request. They were all very fond of Mr. Earle by this time, and they wanted to know about Mr. Trelawny too.

But Mr. Earle could not tell them much on this score. He was still kept in bed, and was not allowed to have the bandage off his eyes. Eather was very sorry indeed to hear this. She could not think what Mr. Trelawny would do. He had always been so active and independent, and she did not think he had ever spent a day in bed before.

"He will very likely be up again to-morrow. He does not like stopping there, I can tell you,"

said Mr. Earle, "but there is nothing that makes people feel so helpless as not being able to see. But for that he would never be so quiet."

"Would he like some blackberries?" asked Puck, opening the basket and looking in. "Let's pick out some of the very best for him, and you tell him we gathered them for him, and hope he'll like them."

So Mr. Earle departed presently with the pick of the spoil, and the children sat and talked about Mr. Trelawny, thinking how sad it was for him to be half blind and not able to do anything, and wondering if they could do anything to cheer him up.

"Children can't do things for grown-ups," said Milly, rather disconsolately. "It's only grown-ups who do things for children. But you did something for Mr. Trelawny, Essie, when you got him out of the cave. I should like to have done that. You saved his life, didn't you?"

"Yes!" cried Pickle; but Esther said,—

"No—at least I mean it wasn't really like that. I went and told the servants, and they got him out."

“But if you hadn’t gone in when he called, if you’d run away as some silly people would have done, he’d have been a deader as sure as a gun,” chimed in Pickle eagerly. “Mr. Earle said so his very self.”

This act of Esther’s was very interesting to all the children, and certainly she found that all her old fears of Mr. Trelawny had vanished away.

The very next day she was admitted to his darkened room, where he was lying on a couch with a bandage over his eyes, and his hand and arm bound up too. She sat beside him quite a long time, telling him all about her own adventure that day, about what had befallen the boys on the same afternoon, and about their doings these last days—how they had been often up in the woods getting nuts and blackberries, and how they were enjoying their holiday.

Esther found that Mr. Trelawny was a very nice person to talk to, although his voice was still rather loud, and he had a quick, imperious way of asking a question which sometimes made her jump. But he was always interested in what she said. He made her explain exactly where

they went each day, and how the trees were looking, and what things they found in the woods, and what all the live creatures were doing.

Indeed Esther found that she had to notice things much more closely than she had ever done before, and this was rather interesting, she thought. She and the boys all began noticing everything, so that Esther might tell about it to Mr. Trelawny; and she was sure he liked it, though he did not exactly say so, but made his funny snorts, and seemed trying to trip her up with his questions. But she was not afraid of him now, and she did not mind if she did make a mistake. She found she was learning a great deal more than she had ever known before about the world she lived in, and that in itself was very interesting.

One day at the end of the week, she came in to her mother and found her with an open letter in her hand and a rather perplexed face.

“Is anything the matter, mama?” she asked.

“O my dear! I hardly know. No, nothing is the matter, but it is such a sudden thing to suggest. I have got a letter from Mr. Trelawny.”

“O mama ! then can he see again ? ”

“No, my dear. It was not written by him, but only at his dictation. There is a good deal of reason in what he says, but it is all so unexpected.”

“What is it, mama ? ”

“He asks if I will shut up the Hermitage for the winter, and come with you all and stay at the Crag.”

“O mama ! Why ? ”

“To keep him company, he says. To cheer him up. To make a little life about the old house for a poor blind man.”

“But, mama, he isn’t going to be blind, is he ? ” cried Esther, distressed.

“I hope not indeed, dear. He has seen the oculist again, and hopes are held out—strong hopes, he says—that he will recover the sight of one eye, at least. But recovery will be slow, and it must not be forced, or he may lose his sight altogether. For the next few months he will have to be content to use other people’s eyes more than his own. Of course that is much better than being always blind. But the poor man feels it a good deal, one can see.”

“And he wants us to go and stay with him?”

“That is what he asks—to stay for the winter months, and see how we get on. As he says, he is very dependent upon Mr. Earle, and it would be much more convenient if the boys were living in his house, so that the lessons could be given there; and then, as he cannot read or study or employ himself as he has been used to do, a silent house, with nobody to speak to for the greater part of the day, would be very dreary for him. He says that he has no kinsfolk except ourselves. Your father was the last blood relation of whom he knows anything, and he seems to feel that we belong to him in a certain sort of way. What do you think about it, Esther, my dear? Do you think we ought to go?”

Esther's face was quite flushed and eager.

“O mama, if we can help him, I think we ought!”

“He says we might bring Genefer as my maid, and make any arrangements we liked about the other servants, and he would see that the house and garden here were properly cared for. Of course, it would be a great saving of trouble and

expense in a way, but it would not be quite like living at home. Mr. Trelawny would be the master, and we should all have to keep his rules. But that might be a good thing for the boys. I sometimes think they want a stronger hand over them."

"I think it would be a very good plan," said Esther; "they are getting so much better, and they are fond of Mr. Trelawny. He would make them obey, and they would like it. They always obey Mr. Earle now, and they like him better than anybody almost."

"It would be more the sort of life they have been accustomed to—a big house and a man's authority," said Mrs. St. Aiden reflectively. "And Mr. Trelawny is a sort of guardian to you, and has been a most kind friend to me since your father died. We must not forget that. He asks it as a favor to himself. You can read the letter if you like."

Esther did so, and looked up with the sparkle of tears in her eyes.

"O mama, you will go, won't you?"

"I suppose so, dear, if you like the plan, and

think you could all be happy there. As he says, it is a big house, and we should have our own rooms, and the boys' noise need not trouble him more than he cares about. I don't think their father would mind. After all, it is only a long visit. He only asks us just for the winter months."

"He wants us to go as soon as we can," said Esther.

"Yes, you see he feels his blindness so much, and a merry houseful about him would cheer him up. Well, dear, would you like to run up and tell him that we will try the experiment? It will save me the trouble of writing, and I think he will like to hear it from your lips. And Mr. Trelawny is always in a hurry to carry out his plans."

Esther smiled a little at that. She knew very well that Mr. Trelawny never waited an hour if he could help it. It was his impatience of delay that had caused the accident which had partly destroyed his sight, and might have caused his death.

"I should like to go, mama, if you like me to. I have done my lessons for to-day. The boys are

having their navigation. I don't do that with them."

"Well, then, run off, dear, with the answer. I don't see how we could refuse. And I always think that this house in the winter is just a little damp. I shall be glad to be out of it before the fall of the leaf."

Esther had her hat in her hand, and was soon on her way to the Crag. How strange to think that before long she might be actually an inmate of that house! And how much stranger still that she was not a bit afraid of the prospect!

It was a beautiful afternoon—as warm as summer; and when Esther approached the house, she gave a little jump of surprise, for there was Mr. Trelawny lying on a couch on the terrace, his eyes still bandaged up so that he could see nothing, but at least he could breathe the fresh wind blowing softly off the sea, and Esther knew how he would like that.

She ran forward, forgetting all about her old shyness.

"O Mr. Trelawny, how nice for you to be out of doors!"

“Ha! is that my little Goldylocks?” said the invalid, stretching out the hand he could use. “So you have found your way up to the old blind man, have you? I suppose you have not brought me any letter from your mother yet. That would be too soon.”

Esther clasped her two hands around that of Mr. Trelawny, and said,—

“Mama said I might run up and tell you. She has got your letter, and we think it so kind of you. We should like very much to come and pay you a nice long visit, if you don’t think we shall be in your way.”

His strong fingers closed over her little hands in a tight grip; she could see that his mouth was smiling, and that there was pleasure in every line of his face.

“Is that so, little woman? Have you taken counsel together over the blind man’s request? Of course your mother would not settle anything so important without the leave of the ‘little manager.’”

Esther did not mind being teased now, not one bit. She gave a little soft laugh as she answered,—

“We think it would be a very nice plan, if you like it too. I know the boys will be just delighted. They think this is the very nicest house in the whole place, and I think it will suit mama. She will enjoy this nice sunny terrace in fine weather, and the view of the sea. We can’t see a bit of the sea from our house.”

“And will somebody else enjoy it too?” asked Mr. Trelawny. “What about my little Goldyllocks herself?”

“Oh, I shall like it!” answered Esther softly, stroking the hand she held. “I think it is beautiful up here, and I like being useful. Do you think I can be useful to you, Uncle Robert, if I come?”

“I mean to make you very useful, little woman,” he said. “It was partly for that reason I thought out the plan. I want a little niece or granddaughter of my own to wait upon me and take care of me. As I haven’t got one quite of my own, I have to do the next best thing, and try to steal one who will do instead.”

A little while ago Esther would have shaken in her shoes at the notion of being stolen by Mr.

Trelawny, but now she listened to these words with only a little thrill of pleasure.

“ I should like to be your little granddaughter,” she said. “ You must tell me what you want me to do.”

He drew her down beside him on the couch, and passed his hand over her head.

“ You will have to learn how to be eyes for me, for a little while at any rate, Goldylocks, and to do the same for me that the dog does for the blind man—lead me about, and take care that I don’t fall. Will that be a great nuisance, little woman ?”

“ Oh no ! I like taking care of people,” answered Esther earnestly ; “ only I am so sorry you want taking care of at all. But it won’t be for very long. You will be able to see again soon, won’t you ?”

“ I hope so, my little maid, I hope so. They give me good words when I ask the question myself. But they all tell me I must be patient—be patient ; and, Esther, though I am an old man, and ought to have learned that lesson long ago, I find that I have not done so. I find it harder

to be patient than anything else in the world, and it is harder to learn lessons when we are old than when we are young. Hallo ! hallo !—what's this ?”

This exclamation was caused by Mr. Trelawny's becoming aware of something warm and damp dropping upon his hand. Esther hastily dashed the drops from her eyes, but her old friend knew whence they had come, and something like a quiver passed over his face.

“ Child, child, you must not cry,” he said.

“ I was only wishing I could be blind instead of you for a little while,” said Esther, with a little catch in her voice.

Her hands were held very closely by Mr. Trelawny's strong fingers ; his voice was not a bit gruff as he answered,—

“ I believe you, my dear, I believe you. You are like your father, and he was the most unselfish man I ever knew. I believe you would give me the eyes out of your head if you had power to do it ; and as you have not that, you must learn to use them for my benefit, and I shall expect them to see a great deal. Tell me what you see now.”

Esther looked round and scarcely knew where to begin, but she was thinking too much of Mr. Trelawny to be self-conscious, and soon she was telling him just how the sea looked, with the great burning track of yellow light across it, as the sun slowly sank ; and how big and golden-red the sun grew as it drew near to the horizon ; and how the little fishing boats were all coming home ; and in which direction the clouds were sailing ; and how the white-winged seagulls were fishing in the bay, and wheeling round and round, calling to each other with their strange, mournful cries.

It was very interesting, she thought, to try to make somebody else see it all ; and Mr. Trelawny evidently could, for he sometimes interrupted to tell her things she had not noticed herself, so that she often looked quickly at him to make sure that he really was not “ peeping.” For she knew he must not try to use his eyes yet, even though he might be able to see by and by with one of them at any rate.

“ If the sun is dipping, you must run home, childie,” he said at last. “ Run home and tell

your mother that I am very grateful to her for humoring a blind man's fancy, and that the sooner she and her tribe can come and take possession, the better he will be pleased."

"I will tell her," answered Esther. "I think we could come quite soon. There will not be so very much to do, and if we should leave anything behind, we can easily fetch it away afterwards. I will talk to Genefer about that. She and I will do the packing, you know."

"Of course, of course; the 'little manager' will manage all that. I shall soon be managed out of house and home, I expect. What a wide field the Crag will give to such an enterprising little woman!"

"You are teasing me now," said Esther, laughing, and bending down she kissed him on the lips, and then taking her hat, ran lightly down the hill towards home, a very warm feeling in her heart towards the redoubtable owner, who had once been the very terror of her life.

Half-way down she encountered the boys, who were running to meet her, brimful of excitement.

"O Essie! Essie! is it true?"

“ Are we going to live up there? ”

“ Did he really ask us too? Oh, won't it be jolly? Won't it be scrumptious? Aunt Saint said you'd gone to settle it all. Do say that it's all settled now.”

“ Yes, quite,” answered Esther; “ Mr. Trelawny wants us to go as soon as ever we can. He says the house seems so empty and lonely now that he can't read or go about or amuse himself as he used to do. And he wants Mr. Earle so much more now; that is another reason. You must be very good and nice, boys, and not give trouble. We mustn't worry him now that he's ill.”

“ We won't,” cried Pickle earnestly. “ We'll be as good as gold. I mean, we'll try to be as good as we can.—Won't we, Puck?”

“ We will,” answered that young man solemnly. “ I should like Mr. Trelawny to like us. Perhaps, then, he'll let us stay always. I mean till Crump—no, till father comes back or we go to school. I don't like it when Mr. Earle is angry with us, and I don't want Uncle Bob to be either.”

“ I think it'll be awfully nice,” said Pickle, as

they wended their way home again through the wood. "I shall try and help Uncle Bob too. Aunt Saint said he wanted you, Essie, because you would be like a pair of eyes to him. I know why he thought that. You're always doing kind things for other people, and you don't care about yourself if other people are happy. I just know if I were to be ill, I should like to have you come and see me and sit with me. It can't be just because you're a girl, for that Pretty Polly is a girl, and she thinks herself very good too, but I'd sooner have a toad come to sit with me than her."

"O Pickle, don't talk like that!"

"I'd twice as soon have the toad," cried Puck; "toads are nice things, and they have such funny eyes—like precious stones. She's just a prig, and I can't abide her. We won't ever ask her up to play at the Crag. I shall tell Uncle Bob about her, and he won't let her come then."

"That would be unkind," said Esther gently. "I don't think we ought to be unkind to Prissy. She tries to be very good, you know, and she is always obedient."

Pickle and Puck were silent for a minute. They had been thinking, very seriously for them, about obedience of late. They had recognized their own failure, and had been sorry for it. In the old days they had taken this matter too lightly, but they were learning better now.

“Well,” said Puck at length, “she may be obedient, but she’s nasty too. You’re obedient and nice, Essie. I like you. But if you say we’ve got to ask Prissy, we will; only I hope Uncle Bob will laugh the priggishness out of her if she comes.”

Great excitement reigned in the little house during the next days, for there seemed no reason to postpone the arrangement if it were really to be carried out. Esther and Genefer were busy putting away household things, and packing up personal belongings. The boys flitted hither and thither, helping and hindering, and made daily excursions to the Crag to get news of Mr. Trelawny, and tell him how they were getting on.

Lessons were not to be recommenced till the party got up to their new quarters, and the cart

came daily to fetch away boxes that were ready for removing.

Milly and Bertie were rather sorrowful at the thought of losing their playmates, but Puck brought good news from the Crag.

“Uncle Bob says you may come up every Saturday afternoon and play with us. He doesn’t think we shall go sailing in the *Swan* very often now, because the sea gets rough in the winter; but there are no end of jolly things to do up there, and Uncle Bob says we may have you up whenever you can come on Saturdays. Esther can ask Prissy too, if she wants her, but you are our friends. Prissy never cares to play with us.”

This was delightful news, for the Crag had never been anything but a mysterious region of wonders to the rectory children. Mr. Trelawny had sometimes asked the parents to send them; but Mrs. Polperran did not entirely approve of Mr. Trelawny, and she was half afraid lest some harm should come to her brood through his love of practical joking. It was very exciting to think of visiting there now, and seeing all the strange things that were said to exist in that house.

“Is he really a magician or a wizard ? ” asked Milly with bated breath.

“I don’t believe he is,” answered Pickle. “I believe he’s just a nice, jolly old gentleman ; only he’s very clever, and people don’t understand, and call him names. I don’t believe there are any magicians left now. I believe he’s just the same as other people.”

“But the pickled skeletons in the tanks,” urged Milly.

“I don’t believe there are any really,” answered Puck, with a note of regret in his voice ; “I don’t think he pickles anything except specimens that go into bottles. We shall find out all about it when we go to live there. But I don’t believe he’s a bit of a magician, and Essie doesn’t think so either. She isn’t a bit afraid of him now.”

The day for the flitting arrived in due course, and the carriage and a last cart were sent down to the Hermitage to convey Mrs. St. Aiden and her belongings. Genefer remained behind to shut up the house, and the boys preferred to climb the hill by the path through the wood. But Esther drove up with her mother by the zigzag road, and

as the great easy carriage rolled smoothly along, Mrs. St. Aiden said with a little sigh,—

“We must persuade your Uncle Robert to go driving with us, Esther. He is one of those men who have never cared to drive, but it would do him good, I am sure. This is a most comfortable carriage. It will be delightful to have the use of it, and I am sure it will do him good to get out as much as possible.”

“I dare say he would drive with you, mama,” answered Esther. “We will try to coax him. But I don’t think anybody would care very much about driving all alone.”

Mr. Trelawny was standing in the hall to welcome them. He had a stick in his hand, but he laid it down and drew Esther towards him and kissed her.

“You will be a substitute for that now, my little maid,” he said. “We are going to have some good times together, are we not?”

The boys came rushing in at this moment, helter-skelter, bringing an atmosphere of life and jollity with them.

“Uncle Bob!” cried Puck, rushing up and

seizing his hand, almost gasping and choking in his eagerness and excitement, "we've thought of such a plan for you. We'll do lessons by ourselves for a little while, and Mr. Earle shall make you an electric eye to see with, till your own gets quite well."

CHAPTER XII.

A NEW CHARGE.

ESTHER found out very soon that Mr. Trelawny's threat of making her his "little white slave" was not altogether an idle one.

She had laughed when he spoke the words upon a former visit to the Crag, but she soon found that he did take up a great deal of her time and care, and very willingly was the service rendered that his helplessness made needful.

It seemed to be less irksome to Mr. Trelawny to be led about by the little girl than by any other person—even Mr. Earle ; and, of course, a good deal of Mr. Earle's time was now taken up by lessons.

Esther found that her regular studies were very much interrupted by the demands made upon her time by Mr. Trelawny ; but on the other hand, she thought she was learning as much with him,

as though she had been in the schoolroom all the time. His mind seemed like a perfect storehouse of information ; and as he took his leisurely walks abroad, he would teach Esther all manner of things—history, geography, physiology, geology, and all sorts of things with long names that Esther never learned. All she knew was that she was learning interesting things every day of her life, and that the world seemed to be growing a bigger and more beautiful and wonderful place than she had had the least idea of before.

Mr. Trelawny was a wonderful teacher ; but he expected his lessons to be understood and remembered. Again and again he would put a sudden question to his little companion, asking her about something he had told her on a previous occasion, or making sure that she understood the bearing of some new piece of information he was giving her. Esther soon conquered her first shyness, and was not a bit afraid to ask questions and to say when she did not understand. She found that Mr. Trelawny, though not quite so well used to teaching as Mr. Earle, was never impatient or vexed at being asked to explain himself. What did vex

him was for anybody to make believe to understand a thing he was saying, and then show later on that it had not been understood at all.

As long as the fine weather lasted there were delightful things to do. Sometimes it was a long drive, which Mrs. St. Aiden generally shared ; sometimes a sail in the *Swan* with Mr. Earle and the boys, which was always a great pleasure. Then there was a great excitement for a few days in the place, for the mackerel had come into the bay in shoals ; and the *Swan* went out with the other boats, and the little Polperrans went in her, and they all had spinners, and caught mackerel by the dozen, and fine fun they had out of it till the fish disappeared as suddenly as they had come.

Mr. Trelawny was getting quite strong again, but he was still forbidden to make any attempt to use his eyes, and went about with a bandage and a shade. Perhaps it was this that made him stoop a little in his walk, as he had never done before. Certainly his hair had begun to grow white rather quickly. He had never seemed to be an old man before. Esther had never thought of him as old until just lately, although he used

to speak of himself in a half-joking way as an old fellow ; but he did begin to look old now, though he seemed strong and well in himself.

He liked to be out of doors as much as possible, and Esther was nearly always his companion. She found this interesting in many ways. One was that she had her lessons in a new and interesting fashion from him. Another was that she got to know a great many fresh people, and heard a great many interesting things about them.

Mr. Trelawny owned a good deal of land all round the Crag, and the people who lived in the cottages were his tenants. He had known them all his life, and they had known him. There had been Trelawnys at the Crag for several hundreds of years. Esther found out that Mr. Trelawny, in spite of his gruffness, was very much respected and loved. She liked very much to go with him to see the cottagers and fisher folk, and listen whilst they talked to him and told him all about themselves, their troubles, their bits of good luck, their perplexities with their sons and daughters, and all the different things which went to make up the sum of their simple lives.

She grew fond of the simple people herself, who always had a smile and soft word for "the little lady." She thought it must be very nice to have Mr. Trelawny's power to help them in times of need, to advise them in their troubles, to rebuke those who wanted a sharp reproof, and to warn those who were in danger of falling into bad habits or idle ways.

Often after these visits Mr. Trelawny would talk to Esther a great deal about the family they had just visited, telling her its history, what sort of people they had shown themselves in the past, and what kind of treatment they had required.

Some children might have been bored by this sort of thing, but Esther was never bored. It seemed to her very interesting, and she always listened with great attention.

"You must help me at Christmas time this year, little woman," he said one crisp December day, as they were walking home together. "There are a lot of old fashions we keep up at Christmas here. It's one of the relics of old times that no Trelawny has had the disposition to do away with.

Some people say that the time has gone by for that sort of thing, and that it is obsolete and only a form of pauperization. Perhaps they may be right. But in my day I shall change nothing. I'm too much the old Tory for that. And you will help me this year, won't you? You ought to see how everything is done."

"I should like to," answered Esther eagerly; "what is it you do?"

"Give a great feed—dinner, the people call it—in the hall at the Crag, to which every tenant and his family is entitled to come, even to the babies, if the mothers choose to bring them. No questions are asked, nobody is turned away. Every tenant has the right to be there, and to eat and drink to his heart's content. Five o'clock is the hour for the feed, and after that they sing carols or old songs and make speeches. I come in and drink a glass with them, as the Trelawnys have always done; and when they can eat and drink no more, there is a great giving of presents all round. Bran pies or a Christmas-tree for the children, and clothing or nets or tools for the grown folks. We keep it up till ten o'clock, and

then sing ‘God save the Queen,’ and send them all off to their homes. It used to be done on Christmas Eve or on Christmas Day, but now it’s on Boxing Day, as we think that home is the right place for folks on Christmas Day itself. You will have to be my right hand, little woman, in all the preparations we have to make.”

Esther was skipping along gaily : her face was aglow.

“How nice !” she exclaimed ; “I shall like to help and to see them all. May I come with you, Uncle Robert, when you go to see them at dinner-time ?”

“Of course you may, my dear. Indeed I particularly wish you to be with me. I want to present you to the people then. It will be the best opportunity for it.”

Esther raised her eyes with a questioning look, but then, remembering that he could not see, she said softly,—

“I don’t think I quite understand, Uncle Robert.”

His clasp upon her fingers tightened ; he did not speak for a while, and then he said slowly,—

“No, childie, I know you don’t. I am debating in my mind whether or not to tell you.”

Esther looked up again with the same shade of perplexity in her eyes, but she asked no further question. She knew she would be told if Mr. Trelawny thought it well.

At last he spoke, but rather as though to himself and not to her. It was as if he were debating some point in his own mind.

“I don’t know why she should not be told. The Queen was no older when she found out that in all probability she would one day have a kingdom to rule, and her first wish and resolve were that she might grow up a good woman. I believe it would be the same with this child in a very little kingdom. I want her to grow up feeling what are the duties which will some day be hers.”

Esther’s heart was beating rather fast by this time. She felt as though something momentous was going to be spoken, and she was not wrong. They had reached the terrace by this time, and with the shelter of the house behind them, and the sunlight falling full upon it, the place was quite warm—so warm that Mr. Trelawny seated

himself under the veranda, and drew the little girl between his knees.

“My dear,” he said, “I suppose you are too young ever to have wondered who will live at the Crag after I am gone.”

Esther did not speak. It had certainly never entered her head to think about such a thing as this.

“I am the last of the Trelawnys,” continued the old man ; “I have not a single blood relation of that name to come after me. Once I thought it would be otherwise. For three happy years I had a wife living with me here, and a little boy who had just learned to call me ‘daddy.’ Then they were both taken away. It was all so long ago that the folks here have almost forgotten, and some of them speak of me as a bachelor. But I have never forgotten. I never could care for anybody else. I have lived my life alone, and I have nobody to come after me—nobody to love me now.”

Esther suddenly raised the hand she held and carried it to her lips.

“We all love you, Uncle Robert,” she said softly.

He stooped and kissed her, putting his arm round her and holding her close. For with all her clinging, affectionate ways, Esther had never yet spoken of loving her father's old kinsman.

“Thank you for telling me so, childie. Yes, I believe you, my dear. Esther, do you know that you are the only blood relation I have in the world?”

She shook her head, and he felt the motion.

“But that is so, my child. Your father was my only kinsman. At one time I looked upon him as my heir. Then he too was taken. I brought his wife and child to be near me, but I do not think I at once formed any plan for the future. The estate and income are my own property. I can dispose of them as I will. But I want to find a successor who will love the old place, and who will be a merciful as well as a just monarch in the little kingdom which lies around the Crag.”

He paused, and Esther neither spoke nor moved.

“Kingdom is perhaps an obsolete word in these leveling days, yet down here amongst these simple folk the owner of the Crag wields no small power.

It is a power I should fear to put into any but just and merciful hands. Little Esther, do you think you could be a just and merciful ruler here some day? Would you try—like our good and gracious Queen—to ‘be good,’ to love your people, to be a wise and God-fearing ruler, if ever that power were to be entrusted to you?”

She hid her face upon his shoulder. She was startled, overcome, almost frightened. He felt her shiver through all her little frame. He saw that she had understood, and that it was all a very solemn and sacred thing to her.

He held her very closely as he went on speaking.

“Little Esther, it is a great charge, and you are but a little girl now, but you will grow older every year; and I believe I shall be spared many years longer myself, though I do not expect ever to be the same man that I was before my accident. I have talked to your mother about this, and she is willing that you should continue to live with me, to learn the ways of the place, and how to be its mistress one day. My will is drawn up, leaving all to you. I am just waiting till I

have my sight back to sign it I think you are learning every day to love and understand the people better and better. Perhaps some day you will take my name, so as to keep the old name with the old acres ; but there is time enough to think of that. You have always been used to having the charge of something or somebody. It will only be adding a new one to the list. Do you think your little shoulders are strong enough to bear the burden? Will you be my little girl now, and be good to the people when I am gone?"

Her tears came at that, not loudly or noisily, but raining down very fast.

"O Uncle Robert, I will do what I can. I will try to be good. But, please, don't talk as though I were going to have it all. I can't bear that. I only want to help you, and learn to do things as you do them."

"That is all I ask, my dear. I hope that is all that will be laid upon you for a good many years to come. Indeed, you would never have the sole burden in your childhood and youth, of course. But I should like to feel that you were growing up in the traditions of the place, knowing what

is before you, just as you would know it if you were in very truth the little niece or granddaughter that I call you."

For a few days after that talk Esther went about with a very grave face, and was absorbed in a multitude of new thoughts. But children quickly grow used to an idea, and so it was here. The little girl never spoke of it to anybody but Mr. Trelawny and her mother, but she began to have an understanding of the new charge which would one day in all probability be hers ; and she followed Mr. Trelawny about more assiduously than ever, waiting upon him, watching him, trying to forestall all his wants and to understand all that he was doing ; whilst he, on his part, took her more and more into his confidence, both feeling that a new and very tender bond had been established between them.

The coming Christmas festivities kept the boys fully engrossed. They had leave to go into Penzance with Mr. Earle to make their purchases, and they were full of mystery and excitement for days before and after.

At last they could bear the burden of their

great secret no longer, and pulling Esther into their room one day, a little before Christmas Day, they whispered the tremendous secret.

“ Esther, we’ve got it ; we got it all by ourselves. Nobody knows---not even Mr. Earle. Would you like to see it ? It is such a funny thing ; but we know what it must be, and we’ve bought it. It was very expensive, but we don’t care if only he likes it. Would you like to see it first ? ”

“ What is it ? ” asked Esther, infected by the air of mystery around her. The boys’ room was almost dark, for the light was fading fast. Puck was quivering all over in his excitement. He seemed able to contain himself no longer, and burst suddenly into speech.

“ It’s an electric eye—an electric eye for Mr. Trelawny. We found it at last in a bicycle shop. Come here, Esther, and look. You know people do have such accidents on bicycles. I expect they knock out their eyes and have electric ones put in. It’s rather big, but Mr. Trelawny has such big holes for his. I expect it’ll go in.—Pickle, open the door and we’ll show her.”

Pickle was fumbling under the carpet for a key, which was hidden in some crevice in the boards and when that was brought to light a cupboard was unlocked, and then suddenly one of the boys did something, and immediately a bright ray of white light shone forth from a small glass ball which had somewhat the look of an eye.

“ There, there, look ! ” cried Puck, dancing up and down in his excitement ; “ there it is—an electric eye ! Do you think he’ll like it ? Don’t you think he’ll be pleased ? Just see what a light it gives ! He’d be able to see with that in the dark as well as in the light.”

Esther was immensely impressed, though rather perplexed. The eye was certainly very wonderful, and could be turned on and off at will ; but whether it would help Mr. Trelawny in his present condition she did not feel quite certain, but the boys had no manner of doubt.

“ Won’t it be jolly when he can go about without that horrid old shade, and without a stick, or anybody to lead him ? I can’t think why he didn’t have one before, but I suppose he couldn’t find one. We hunted all over, and people only

laughed when we asked. But one man told us he'd seen something like one in the bicycle shop, and sure enough there it was. Sometimes it gets empty and has to be filled up, but Mr. Earle could do that, I'm sure. He can do lots of things with electricity. I can't think why he hasn't made Uncle Bob an electric eye all this time, but I'm glad he hasn't, because we shall so like to give it him."

It was hard work waiting for Christmas Eve, when the presentation was to be made; but the preparations for the great feast took up much time and attention, and drew off the boys' thoughts from the engrossing subject of the electric eye.

But when the dusk of Christmas Eve had really come, and when Mr. Trelawny suddenly appeared in their midst, showering parcels about him in the twilight, like a miniature snowstorm, then the boys made a rush upon him, and the electric eye was produced and exhibited, Pickle being the principal speaker, though Puck kept up a running, breathless commentary, almost choking in his excitement and ecstatic hopes.

Mr. Trelawny received the gift, and felt it all over. Then he turned his head towards Mr. Earle, and said,—

“Come, Earle ; we must retire and see what we can do with this wonderful eye. You’re a bit of a genius, according to these young men, and we’ll see whether you understand adjusting it or not.”

Mr. Earle’s face lighted up, and he marched off with Mr. Trelawny, whilst the servants brought in lamps, and the children, in breathless delight, opened the parcels which had been showered upon them.

The fairies must surely have whispered in Mr. Trelawny’s ears, for the secret desire of every heart seemed to be gratified.

There were the daintiest of working and writing materials for Esther, together with just the very books she would have chosen for herself had the whole world’s library been at her disposal. There were model boats for the boys, and tools, and knives, and charts, and books ; and the children had little presents for one another, which had to be opened and explained and admired ; and Mrs. St. Aiden had not forgotten, or been forgotten,

and her couch was the center of the busy, happy group.

Then suddenly the door was thrown open and in stalked Mr. Trelawny, without his shade, and walking erect, with his eyes looking just as they did of old, save that they were protected by a pair of spectacles with thick glasses.

The children did not know that there had been any previous rehearsal of such a scene as this, and that Mr. Trelawny had been permitted to try to use his eyes by degrees for the last week or more. Even Esther did not know this—it was to be kept for a Christmas surprise ; and now, with the glint of the light upon the spectacles, it was small wonder that Puck broke into a shout of triumph, and yelled at the top of his voice,—

“ The electric eye ; the electric eye ! Three cheers for Uncle Bob and Mr. Earle and the electric eye ! ”

Esther had run forward and was grasping the hand of her kind old friend. Her eyes were brimming over with tears of joy.

“ O Uncle Robert, can you really see ? ”

“ Yes, my little maid ; I can see everything

clearly again, thank God ! Let me have a good look at the face of my little woman, for once I thought I should never see it again."

It was hard to say who was happiest that night —Mr. Trelawny with his newly-restored gift, which, if somewhat impaired, would still be strong and serviceable again ; or the boys, in their conviction that they had found the means whereby this result had been achieved ; or Mrs. St. Aiden, who had found a safe shelter for herself and her child under the care of this kind and wealthy kinsman ; or little Esther, who somehow felt that, though another charge had been given her, yet the burden which had rested rather heavily upon her since her father's death had somehow been wonderfully lightened. There was Uncle Robert now to care for them and think for them, and she was so glad it should be so. And she somehow felt almost certain that the Crag would always be their home now.

She was more sure of it upon the night of the feast, when Mr. Trelawny took her by the hand and led her into the big hall that was filled from end to end with people she knew, crowded together

at the long tables. She did not understand all the speech that Mr. Trelawny made, for he spoke it in the broad dialect of the country and fisher folk. But they understood, and they shouted and cheered ; and then Mr. Trelawny put his hand upon her head, and said,—

“ You must make them a little bow, my dear, and I will make a speech for you. Don't you understand that they are paying homage to you ? They are accepting you as my little grand-daughter, who will one day rule here in my stead, and they are promising to love and be loyal to you, as I hope you will be loyal and true to them.”

And then Mr. Trelawny stooped and lifted her up in his arms and kissed her before them all ; and Esther, as she ran away, overcome with all the honor and notice she was receiving, felt as though such a wonderful Christmas-tide could never come again.

THE END.

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